LANCASHIRE
COUNTY LIBRARY

AUTHOR	COOKE . R.C
TITLE	Give him the earth
BOOK No.	1943220
CLASS No.	F

FICTION RESERVE

FICTION RESERVE

AUTHOR
COOKE. R.C.

CLASS No.
F

TITLE
GIVE HIM THE EARTH

BOOK No.
1943220

e the date shown above
LIBRARY
STON

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/givehimearth0000rupe

GIVE HIM THE EARTH

By the same Author:

TROUBADOUR
NIGHT OUT
COSMOPOLIS
RELEASE THE LIONS
PICARO
SHOULDER THE SKY
BLIND GUNNER
CRUSADE

GIVE HIM THE EARTH

by

RUPERT CROFT-COOKE

JARROLDS *Publishers* LONDON
Limited 34 *Paternoster Row* *E.C.*4

039569938

First published 1930.
Cheaper edition June, 1936.

DR/AR

PRINTED IN
GREAT BRITAIN,
AT THE ANCHOR
PRESS, TIPTREE,
:: ESSEX ::

To

MY FATHER AND MOTHER

LIBRARY

Give him the moon to play with,
Give him the stars as well,
Give him the earth, for what he is worth
Only his mother can tell.

Sentimental Song.

CONTENTS

Part One
GREYCASTER

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	MARY	17
II.	BRUCE	35
III.	MARY	56
IV.	BRUCE	60
V.	MARY	76
VI.	BRUCE	83
VII.	MARY	92
VIII.	BRUCE	98
IX.	MARY	115
X.	BRUCE	125
XI.	MARY	135

Part Two
SILLIWAKE

XII.	BRUCE	147
XIII.	MARY	158
XIV.	BRUCE	168
XV.	MARY	178
XVI.	BRUCE	191
XVII.	MARY	209
XVIII.	BRUCE	216
XIX.	MARY	222
XX.	BRUCE	227
XXI.	MARY	233
XXII.	BRUCE	236
XXIII.	MARY	240

Part Three

AND AFTER THAT

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIV.	BRUCE	247
XXV.	MARY	258
XXVI.	BRUCE	263
XXVII.	MARY	270
XXVIII.	BRUCE	281

PART ONE

Greycaster

CHAPTER I

MARY

THEY had a compartment to themselves all the way up from Southampton. The mother sat facing the engine, watching the landscape rather sleepily. The boy, who was opposite to her, looked out of the window too, but there was eagerness, even excitement, in his gaze.

Mary was thirty-five, Bruce sixteen. They had landed that morning after a slow voyage from Buenos Aires, and this was the first time in seventeen years that Mary had seen her country, while Bruce, born in Argentina, had never been home before.

They passed a green-gold wood stretching close to the railway line, and Bruce, seeing the haze of early colour, broke their sympathetic silence to say that it was beautiful. His mother smiled a little wistfully. "I'm afraid you won't find Greycaster quite like this," she said.

But the boy rejected the suggestion without reply. "I'm going to love it all," he announced some minutes later, when the train was running among rolling pastures.

In appearance they were sufficiently alike for their relationship to be credible once it was known, but a casual observer would not have realized that they were mother and son. Mary looked scarcely old enough. Seventeen years in the South had not even hardened her small lovely face nor lined it. It was, as it had been when she first went out, a flower-face, not waxen nor exotic, but with the English tints of wild-flower petals. She had the gay repose of flowers, too ; her movements were not sudden, even her smile was slow and curling.

Bruce, on the other hand, had beauty of a cruder sort. He was fair, rather wild, with hair tumbling about his

forehead and blue eyes looking out freely without hesitation or covertness, unafraid of being shocked or disappointed. When Mary looked across to him now it was that quality of openness, that laughing denial of all restraint, so clearly written in his decisive features, which made her most apprehensive of the future. For she was bringing him, she felt, from a place where laughter and passion and speed were all that mattered, to her sister's home in England, where very different things were considered important.

Yet there was no other way. Bruce must go to an English school, and to take him to Greycaster, to her sister Eileen's house, was the only means that Mary could find of giving her son what she believed him to need. Since her husband's death she alone had had to plan her son's upbringing, and the point had been reached, in South America, when this had seemed to Mary essential. So they had left the sunlight and were on their way to the town in which Mary was born.

At eighteen she had left her home there to marry Geoffrey Kerry, a bank clerk, who was to sail almost at once for Buenos Aires. Geoffrey was ten years older, lean, long-toothed, moustached ; he had met her at a local dance, made love to her at once, married her six weeks later. When she tried to decide whether she had ever loved him she found it difficult, and, anyway, she did not want to think about it. She realized soon that he had never cared very deeply for her. He had just had the offer of this job abroad when they met, and his bank made a special allowance to married men. He was frankly afraid to face the new life completely alone, and had actually and detestably been "looking for a wife" at the time when he had come to that dance.

In Greycaster Geoffrey had been regarded as rather a "success with women". His experience had been crude, but enough to breed his own confidence in the attraction of his long military face and bearing, his cheap-jack repartee and proficiency at Rugby football. He had succeeded remarkably well with local shop-girls and the

hungrier type of married woman. So that when he met Mary, and decided that she was "the girl for him", he had little doubt that he would be able to take her with him to B.A. (as he had already learned to call it).

She had the nature to be thus attracted, then. She loved the utter laxity of dependence, even in thought. It was not laziness, but a positive desire to trust herself to someone else. And this need of hers Geoffrey, with his large hands and tall bearishness, his self-confidence and popularity with men, fed half deliberately. So they were married, and made their honeymoon the voyage out.

The dénouement to their small romance was not long in coming. Before they had reached their destination Geoffrey had come to bed several times inane with drink, and tried to maul her in the cramped and steaming atmosphere of their second-class cabin, all the time inclined to break into alcoholic laughter. She began to shrink from him at once, before even his first marital hankering was appeased, so that his lust for her, which in a man of his type would probably have simmered quietly to satiety in a few months if it had been unchecked, was prolonged for years, and from being frankly and physically revolting to her, grew to be a perpetual cruciation. He, of course, never saw the justice of this, and in their five years of discord before he went home to the war, he always felt himself aggrieved and for a long time blamed her uncompromisingly for the failure of their marriage.

Besides, he continued very single-mindedly to drink. The good fellowship which in Greycaster had made him a popular man at the bar and in the club-house, turned him, in the climate of the South, to a well-soaked and unimaginative drunkard. They had taken a small villa in San Isidro, a suburb of the city, when they arrived, and Geoffrey went into the bank every day. But at the Buenos Aires station, from which he left for home, was an inviting *confiteria* where the numerous Englishmen who lived on his line would meet at night for cocktails. And there was no closing-time.

At first Mary used to wait up for him, sulkily reading

or sewing. She would sit in a deck-chair in the tiled *patio* of their house—the verandah turned inwards to their tiny garden—and watch the electric light on the giant rose blooms, because it seemed beautiful and yet somehow grotesque. She grew very unhappy in those evenings, unhappy in her own way, which was deep and uncommunicative. She soon gave up attempting to remonstrate with him, and dropped into resignation. Sometimes he would come home with a leering apology. "Sorry to be so late, old girl."

"That's all right," Mary would say, closing her book.

On other evenings he would master his unsteadiness as though imagining himself to appear sober, and speaking in a low, brisk voice, say heavily, "Got kept late at the bank." Then Mary would nod as if she were in sympathy.

At last came the birth of her baby. In this she suffered cruelly. But in an immense cool Argentine hospital they tended her, enabled her to take nourishment, and when at last she was delivered of Bruce she was strong and healthy, and her baby from the first was vigorous and without blemish.

After that it was easier for her. She was never again alone. She and Bruce had a room to themselves, and Geoffrey did not trouble her for a time. Often now he did not return at all at night—but if she minded this it was only remotely. From the first she was too absorbed in her son to consider very deeply the conduct of her husband. She no longer hated or feared him. She endured his occasional caresses—for he still languished sheepishly after her—arranged his meals and comforts with impatient efficiency, and let him go his own way.

Her baby changed her very markedly. She grew quite primitive over him. Seeing her sitting day after day in the sunlight of the *patio* with Bruce at her breast, or asleep to her low crooning, the Galician servant used to say: "*Es una tonta con el bebito.*" And it was true that for a time her conduct with her child was so animal as to make her appear almost dull-witted. If anyone approached her chair she would look up with the protective and

furtively fierce expression of a wild animal guarding a litter. If she spoke to anyone as she nursed her child it was from a distance, and in such a way as to make her interlocutor feel that he, and indeed the rest of creation, were of scant consequence compared with Bruce's next bottle.

From being alone all day with Teresa, the one servant, she soon learned the crude Spanish of the emigrants. That was the one of her achievements which irritated her husband most, since he, in common with most other English residents in Buenos Aires, spoke of the Argentines as "the natives", and, so far from troubling to learn their language, rather pathetically did his best to treat them with contempt. This was difficult, because he was dealing with a cultured and vigorous and extremely independent race. He himself had learnt a bit of menu Spanish, and considered it sufficient. He was content to resemble a British Minister of the time, who, having trodden on the foot of an Argentine lady and wishing to apologize, raised his hat and said, *"Con su permissu, Señora!"*

Mary, on the other hand, always felt an interest in the handsome people about her, though she scarcely spoke to them except on her shopping expeditions. She liked the kind-eyed men padding along the cobbled streets through the sunshine in their noiseless canvas shoes, and admired the trim little *señoritas* who dressed so exquisitely and were beginning to break from their traditional shells of propriety. And after a month or two of experiment she had resisted Geoffrey's attempts to "get her to meet" his friends whom she found too like the people of her own town to be appropriate to this enchanted country. Besides, against an Argentine background the men had gone to seed somewhat, and the women grown scraggy in the heat. Deep in her she had a love for England and its people which caused these discontented members to make her feel like saying to every Argentine she met, "Oh, but you should come home and see my country people as they really are!" But she did not for a long time have an

opportunity of talking to Argentines other than shop-keepers.

Then one evening Geoffrey arrived home unexpectedly early and brought Tito. She afterwards remembered him as he appeared that first evening, following her husband through the wrought-iron gateway that led into the court of their small house. He was already slightly inclined to heaviness, but compact and healthy, his thick dark hair trained to the skull, his brown face with full, good-natured features and strenuous eyes which appreciated her from head to foot. He wore a cream-coloured Palm-Beach suit with white buttons, she remembered, and he swept off his hat a trifle ostentatiously when he saw her sitting with Bruce in the *patio*

"Dr. Ernesto Montéz," said Geoffrey, and when the Argentine smiled he showed not only fine teeth, but pleasure at meeting her, and friendliness, and interest.

It appeared afterwards that he could be in some way useful to Geoffrey at the bank—everything in Argentina is done by influence—and that Geoffrey had known him for a considerable time. But not until that evening, when the two had met in a local café and had cocktails, had it occurred to Geoffrey that his best way to gratify the man was to introduce him to Mary. He had invited him home to "meet his Señora", and Tito had readily walked round with him.

Mary found him little more than a boy ; indeed, he was some years younger than her husband. And Tito was scarcely seated when he fondled and admired her baby's toes. Mary knew that Bruce's toes were beautiful, but no one had ever told her so. And though she eyed him coldly for a moment as his hand stretched out to her child, from the moment that he spoke, she loved him.

That began their friendship. For a long time it was quiet and unclouded, for he would come round in the afternoon and sit with her till the sun dropped precipitously behind the eucalyptus trees. Like nearly all his race he was an excellent talker, and with her baby in her arms Mary would watch the perpetual mobility of his face, the

expressions changing dramatically as he recounted long incidents of his childhood, or went over exciting improbabilities in the history of his country. She was fascinated by stories of San Martin the liberator, of Rosas the tyrant, of Indian alarms, of foreign invasions, even of our own disastrous attempt to colonize the country. But also he talked of the big city today, of his college there, of the university and corrupt politics of the place.

Then one afternoon he brought a guitar, and sang long, lugubrious *gaucho* songs with rhythmic haunting melodies, songs whose words she barely understood but which made her almost cry. And when Tito saw her near tears he kissed her for the first time, and on the forehead. "Little Dolorosa!" he said, smiling. Afterwards, in moments of tenderness, he always used the foolish name.

Mary was not then quite twenty. She had been lonelier than the ombú trees, he told her, for they stand solitary on the bare pampas. She had been profoundly unhappy in everything but her child. And she liked the vivid companionship of this talkative young man who could appreciate Bruce. But there was something more than that. His visits held the very breath of a novelette romanticism which she could not resist. At twenty, with the cinema and a few serial stories to have given her all she knew of unreality or inspiration, she felt this to be the very soul of rhapsody. The Southern lover, the guitar, the walled garden with its ponderous roses . . . all that she had dimly felt belonged to Argentina had come to her. Tito fulfilled a dream.

Not quite vulgarly, either, did she feel that. The very contemptuous smiles of the perspiring English people she had seen made her only more ready for some such fantasy. Alone and bereft in a country which had seemed to have its own full and interesting life, she was sure of her right to some of it. More still than that she thought of Bruce. For his sake she believed she must have friends here, must not be utterly dependent on the drunken uncertainties of her husband.

But it was not until a year later that her sunlit companionship with Tito became anything more. She had put Bruce into his cot one evening, and was sitting beside it mending a small tear in the mosquito-net, when she heard her husband come in. She was mildly surprised, but scarcely looked up to greet him. He was voluble, and still coherent.

"That blasted Dago been here again today?"

"Tito? Yes."

"Not ashamed to admit it, are you?"

"No."

"Well, I'm not going to have him round my house every day. Everyone's talking about it. It's a disgrace. You know perfectly well what these Argentines are."

Mary said nothing. She was still busy with the mosquito-net.

"They're all the same. Only want one thing with a woman. You know that yourself. Why, a girl can't go out alone in the city. And you let that fellow come here!"

Mary got up. "I'll get some food for you," she said, "I didn't know you were going to be in."

"I don't want any food." He was becoming maudlin. "I'm fed up. Absolutely fed up with it all. You've ruined my life."

Mary was too used to ignoring his rigmaroles to answer this. She said instead, "Don't shout, Geoffrey. You'll wake Bruce."

"That's it—Bruce, Bruce, Bruce. No consideration for me. Just that baby. And I'm scarcely allowed to look at him, though he's my own child, I suppose. I'm sick of hearing nothing but Bruce!" And suddenly, quite unexpectedly, he let out a kick at the cot in which the baby lay asleep. It was not a very hard kick, it may not have been intended for more than an ineffectual gesture. But it seemed for a moment that it had upset the cot. The light metal contraption swayed dangerously, and just as Mary, with a startled cry, seized it, it had lost balance. If she had been a yard farther away Bruce

would have been thrown dangerously on the hard tiles of the *patio*.

Geoffrey said nothing. In some hazy way he was ashamed, for he had sudden fits of liverish love for the boy. He strode straight off to his own room and went to bed.

Mary also was silent. She sat for a long time nursing Bruce, who had wakened up and begun to cry. And when at last she had soothed him again into sleep, she wheeled his cot into her own room and locked the door.

Next day, still moving with that absorbed calm which Geoffrey found so maddening, she took her baby, walked serenely from the house, and went to live with Tito.

She bore the Argentine a daughter at Christmas-time. Tito accused her broadly of being unnaturally indifferent to her second baby—there was certainly something almost perfunctory in her care of Lindita after her wrapt obsession with Bruce. But the little girl, too, promised to be a pretty child, and grew rapidly, at the end of a year being able to gurgle words and walk. If her own mother did not seem to cherish her sufficiently, the household could not be accused of neglect. The army of aunts and cousins, great-aunts, second-cousins, and sisters, which surrounds any big householder in Argentina, clustered perpetually about Lindita's cradle. They had viewed the introduction of Mary as mistress of the house without open question, being accustomed to accept Tito's actions as in some way infallible. And, spinsters mostly, or widows, they were warmed by the chance of assisting in the mothering of Lindita.

Tito already had one son by his wife—she had been taken to a mental home before he met Mary, "driven off her head," he once told her, "by the cackling of those fowls," and he indicated the black-clad relations who lived in the immense house. Julio, the boy, had been wilful and, as it seemed to the old ladies, sulky from the first. Bruce they were scarcely allowed to see. But Lindita made successful laughing noises at them and they loved her.

But Mary's early love for her son took her further than the mere leaving of her husband to live with Tito. Without seeming to realize it in her aloof devotion to her baby's welfare, and the suave way in which she took others for granted and used them to administer to it, she became almost comic. She decided after two years that it would not be good for Bruce to be brought up longer in an Argentine household with Tito as the head of it. Already she had caught him stuttering in imitation of Tito's son the word "Papa" when Tito said good night to the two children. Already she found him babbling Spanish more fluently than English. And so she decided to take him away from the Villa Rosada, Tito's sun-baked palace which overlooked the river, and which he had inherited from his uncle.

It was on her own that she came to this, as to every other conclusion. Still a girl in years, and without a woman friend since childhood, she never realized that there was anything extremely unusual in her behaviour. Since her baby had been born, her former rather physical love for reliance on others had given place to instincts which made her vigilant and, in a maternal way, self-reliant. It did not occur to her that any mother, believing it for the good of her son, would not have left her husband to live with a man who would take care of both her and her child. Still less that when that very care threatened, as she thought, the boy's welfare, she would not abandon it.

So, looking clear-eyed over the River Plate, with Bruce tumbling about in the garden, she thought it was time to leave Tito. She told him so.

Tito had grown more substantial in those two years, but he was as good-humoured as ever. Like most Argentines, who are sprung from so ancient a civilization as the Latin, and re-invigorated in the South, his character had an age-old sophistication and tiredness, larded over with a new and not very profound idealism and vigour. Besides loving Mary he liked her, but refused to admit any mystery about her, and paid homage to nothing in her but her beauty.

"But we shall remain lovers ?" he said.

That had seemed unimportant to Mary. "Are we lovers ?" she asked.

Tito laughed. "But, my darling—what else ? I have loved no one but you for three years. You will always be my adored one. For all you would snap your fingers at me if that child ordained."

"I'm very fond of you, Tito, and you have been always sympathetic and good. . . ."

He was laughing again. "That sounds so nice," he said. "So sisterly. Well, if you don't want to live here any longer you needn't. I'll take a house for you somewhere."

But before the house was taken Mary had news of Geoffrey. He had nearly died, it seemed. A wife of one of his friends had looked after him in the early stages of delirium tremens, but had grown frightened at being called a pink adder, and had him packed off to the English hospital. He was now almost recovered, and the authorities had just succeeded in communicating with her. In a week he would be ready to come out. With almost unconscious impertinence, Mary informed Tito that she should return to him. "Bruce ought to know his father," she said. "At any rate while he is living soberly, as he will be after this."

That, at last, did stir the Argentine. "Damnation, Mary," he began, "you can't go to and fro between us like that. It's unthinkable. After all that . . ."

Mary was quite reasonable. "But you see, Tito, he is Bruce's father. The boy is beginning to need a father now. For a time at least."

"Oh, damn the boy !" said Tito, and took a turn on the lawn. When he returned to the house he found her packing.

So Mary, leaving Lindita to the care of her female retinue, went back to the little villa, and was welcomed by Teresa as though she had been on a holiday. For in the South two years slip by unnoticed, time being a pleasant succession of procrastinations.

When Geoffrey joined her, lined and going slightly bald over the temples, some sort of companionship was formed between them. For a time he ceased to stupefy himself each evening, though she wisely did not attempt to make him renounce his inclinations. And he was unaffectedly glad to have her back.

It was an extraordinary life of compromise that they led. Geoffrey never taunted her with Tito, in fact after the first strangeness they would talk quite unemotionally of her life at the Villa Rosada. Geoffrey was inquisitive about the domestic habits of "these Argentines", and if at times he felt a conventional rising of his gorge when he remembered that his wife had been Tito's mistress, he seemed to consider it a matter of good taste not to show it. Like most reformed drunkards he was dramatically remorseful about the past and, if he came to any conclusion, would probably have admitted with an enjoyable choke that she had been justified in leaving him when he "behaved like a cad". Further, he compromised by showing no hostility to Tito on the few occasions on which he found the Argentine with Mary. He felt curiously certain that there was now nothing but a strong and sexless sympathy between them, or at least nothing more in Mary's regard for the man. And above all he compromised by giving his wife her own way in the matter of Bruce's upbringing—so chastened was he now.

Into this anomalous state of things the news of war broke with particular unexpectedness, since European affairs are not in perspective from Buenos Aires. And Geoffrey at once decided to go home. As soon as the first appeal for volunteers reached Argentina he said he should join the young Englishmen who were sailing shortly. But the news affected Mary no less strongly. She became immediately British. She was proud of Geoffrey and almost regained some love for him when his last few weeks arrived. She had a stubborn and unreasonable quarrel with Tito, who as a neutral saw very little to get excited about. She felt that she hated him for not being "pro-Ally", and herself for having

left an Englishman to live with him. He—not unnaturally—was at a loss to understand this metamorphosis, and she told him she did not want to see him again.

As the second-hand romanticism of Tito's guitar-playing lover's guise had had its part in changing her life before, the second-hand patriotism of the Press stirred her now. And as it had not all been a vulgar thing then, there was something fine in her flag-waving emotions about the war. Bruce was nearly five now, and he, she determined, should be wholly English, the son of a soldier. There was passion in her good-bye kiss to Geoffrey ; he had atoned, she felt, for all he had made her suffer in her 'teens when she had come out alone with him. She went further, and rather pathetically asked him to forgive her for having left him. To which he, of course, replied that he was to blame. So in an orgy of self-recrimination and ardent partiotism they spent their last night together, and she told him she would see no more of Tito, while he promised that he would not ever again be drunk.

It was three years before she received news of his death, and in that time her not very profound new warmth for him had been somewhat chilled by the fact that not once after his departure had he written a line to her, and she never even knew whether he had obtained a commission till she was advised that he had been killed in action. But whatever she felt privately she kept up the legend with her son that his father was a hero—for all she knew to the contrary, he was.

She never went back to live with Tito, and having renounced his love for the years following Geoffrey's departure, she did not again accept it when she was free. But a peculiar understanding remained between them, and they saw a great deal of each other. The Argentine knew what he wanted, and did not mind waiting for it. Mary always liked the man ; his equanimity, his capacity for generous emotion, his quick wits and great talents, made him the most attractive of friends. Besides, she felt the benefit to Bruce of his powerful protectiveness.

As to their daughter, she grew into a slim, leggy, but pretty-faced child, and Mary came to know her well. She never fully resumed guardianship for many reasons. Lindita was now the whole life of several old ladies, who would have been mortally shocked to lose any part of their proprietorship. Mary did not feel her own right strong enough—since she had once abandoned Lindita to their care, when she had felt bound to take Bruce to his father—to insist in any way now. And there was a graver risk. Both she and Tito had agreed that there was but one way to bring up the children if they were to remain ignorant of the tangle about their babyhood. It was for Julio and Lindita to remain as his children, to be brought up entirely as brother and sister in his house, and for Bruce to be hers alone. Thus no question need ever arise in their minds in the future.

Naturally the children saw a great deal of each other. Julio and Lindita were for ever in and out of Mary's small villa, and she was glad for them to be, happy to watch, and in a quiet repressed way to assist in, her daughter's rapid progress. Besides, the three were unfailingly contented together, played elaborate games, and formed a trio in which other children found very small welcome.

So in the years in which Bruce was growing from a sturdy, blue-eyed childhood into a handsome and English youth, Mary remained placidly watching him in San Isidro. It was not until long after the war, and when it was too late to send him to a public school, even if she could have afforded it, that she suddenly realized that he should be in England. She had her widow's pension, and she had her married sister. To her somewhat improvident nature these seemed sufficient.

She explained her decision to Tito. He stormed for several minutes. She could not leave his country. She could not again abandon Lindita; the boy was born here —was actually Argentine by his laws. She would never be able to live in "that climate". To all of which Mary replied, reasoning gently, that Bruce needed English education—an English home. Tito had learnt wisdom

enough not to argue with that. When he called next day she was selling her furniture.

She did not now regret the step, but remembering her sister she feared for her son's happiness. Mary had first written to Eileen a month or two before, and in a number of somewhat guarded letters an arrangement had been made. Eileen and her husband were to take Bruce into their household at Greycaster, and Mary was to get work.

The motives of each of the sisters had been plain enough. Eileen had always been a trifle jealous of Mary's loveliness, of her jaunty husband, and less malevolently of her being swept away to such an almost legendary outpost as Buenos Aires. She herself had married a careful and unimaginative man, usefully employed in a printing works. Her husband had a secure and sufficient income, but she could not forget that Geoffrey Kerry had been considered rather a "lad" in Greycaster, and Mary's marriage had seemed on the whole an enviable one.

So that without being invidious she felt a lurking satisfaction in the role that Mary's letter enabled her to play as rescuer to an improvident younger sister. As she told her husband, "One more in the house will mean very little extra expense, and we ought to do what we can, because Geoffrey was killed in the war." To be just, the second consideration counted with her almost as much as the first.

Mary, on the other hand, saw that to lose her son for a time was the only way of getting what she wanted for him, and her sister had mentioned, in one of her letters, "a very good school" at Greycaster to which they would send him until she could afford to look after him herself, which sounded satisfying. It would be the first time she had ever been parted from him for more than his holidays in the "camp". It would be the first time that she had ever trusted the smallest detail of his welfare to others. But Mary's convincing intuition told her that she must do all this now, and, since she was dealing with her sister Eileen, do it entirely.

Wisely she had decided not even to go up to her sister's house in Greycaster, on the day of their arrival, to see her son lodged. It would only be to torment herself fruitlessly, for she would find that his bedroom faced north, or that he was to be taken to chapel, or that his male cousin had infectious-looking pimples, and there would be no help for it. So, in the spirit in which she had carried him round to the Villa Rosada a decade and a half before, she resolved to hand him over to Eileen at once, and set about seeking work which might in time be remunerative enough to keep them together.

Eileen met them at Waterloo. Mary at once saw the first shock of surprise on her son's face, for Eileen was so unlike her, being plump, managing, matronly. There were hasty and embarrassed greetings, and Eileen took into her own hands the ordering of a porter and the dispatch of their luggage. She scarcely seemed to look at Bruce till this was settled.

Mary watched her sister when they were all three seated in the Underground. The old Eileen! She and Mary were at once "grown-ups", and in a quick, confidential voice Eileen was speaking to her away from Bruce, as though her questions about the voyage, and "poor Geoffrey", would be incomprehensible to him. She was arranging something in her bag, her plump gloved hands busy in its depths, and her pince-nez precarious in the activity of her chatter.

"I'm sorry you're not coming home with us today," she said. "I'm sure Robert would have liked to have seen you after all this time. Though of course he's very busy now. And Tom, our boy, is quite grown up. He's three years older than Bruce, I should think, and such a big boy for his age, though Paula's small still. We've got the same house, you know—well, Robert doesn't like a lot of moving, though we've often said we ought to look for something else. Funny to see you after all this time! Of course you look older, but we none of us get any younger, do we? And what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," said Mary.

"Well, no doubt you'll find something, and of course we'll look after your boy. Robert feels that's only his duty under the circumstances, you know. Poor Geoffrey, it was sad his being killed, and so near the end of the war! I expect you felt it dreadfully, and right out there, too. Well, of course, you'll have your pension, which is something, isn't it? We must get out at the next station; we're going to have some lunch."

Suddenly she seemed to think that she should address a remark to Bruce. She had the air of being capable of all conversation, and quite used to encouraging bashful children, though not, of course, interested in their replies.

"And how do you like England?" she said, turning round to him.

"I haven't seen much of it yet," Mary heard Bruce being polite. "Southampton was rather *triste*."

Eileen returned at once to Mary. "*Triste? Triste?* What does he mean?"

Mary smiled apologetically. "Bruce's English is bound to be a little mixed, dear," she said. "He means 'sad'."

Eileen gave a small giggle. "Oh, I see. Funny to think of him being foreign like that. Here we are. We get off here. I don't suppose you've got Undergrounds like this where you come from. No, up the steps. That's right."

She shepherded them into a big cheap restaurant. Over lunch Mary watched the two together, and sighed. Bruce, she could see, was perplexed and vaguely resentful. Eileen treated him so complacently as a child. But he was behaving beautifully and his aunt was unconscious of anything beyond what she considered shyness in the boy. Mary wondered how it would turn out. Probably it would do Bruce good—he *had* been allowed to run rather wild.

But when, after another tiring train journey, they reached Greycaster, Mary decided to leave them at once. She did not want to be with Bruce when he had his

first sight of the town. She managed to get Eileen to herself for a moment.

"He's not so very young, Eileen," she said.

"Who? Bruce? Oh, quite a boy still, for all his foreign ways. He'll soon get used to us. Seems a little reserved, Mary."

"He is reserved."

"Oh, well, I hope he and Tom get on together. You'll be round to see us soon? That's right. I do hope you get fixed up nicely. Now, Bruce, say good-bye to your mother, because we must get along. We shall be home in a minute. Good-bye, Mary. Good-bye, dear."

Mary held her son in her arms, and whispered, "Darling, it won't be for long. For my sake!" She could see he understood. She fought back tears as she kissed him. "Darling! Darling!" She could feel his arms about her. "I'll come and see you soon." She did not want him to speak, and he did not. "Take care of yourself, Bruce. Oh, my darling boy—I don't like leaving you!" She gave him a watery smile, a last kiss, and saw him go quickly away with his aunt. Eileen turned round and waved, but Bruce could not. Mary knew that it was not that he had forgotten her standing there.

CHAPTER II

BRUCE

"My wife may be the ugliest bitch in Greycaster, but by God I'll leave her the richest!" So, seventy years ago, old Thomas Whittaker used to shout in the saloon bars of his native town, and his remarks are still remembered in a place where humour has always been scanty. But there are more substantial reminders of the man in his Greycaster. For his method of carrying out his threat was a simple one—it was to build. One after another his enormous edifices went up, and when he had grown tired of erecting these cavernous grey villas, he built rows of more modest but equally ugly ones.

By the time that he died—which he did of apoplexy—he had not only covered a very large space with hideous architecture, but he had set such a fashion for building that his work went on unchecked, his successors competing in their search for gloomier plans on which houses might be made. So that now not only Greycaster but the towns which are its neighbours are entirely covered with stonework of unrelenting monstrosity.

For Greycaster does not stand alone, but is one of three adjoining towns. It certainly holds the Cathedral and makes some pretence at retaining an atmosphere of antiquity, but Smetham, which lies so close that there is no boundary line and no pause in the buildings between, challenges its importance by being a naval and dockyard city. And Hillingly, which spreads beyond, the largest of the three, consists of rows and rows of houses. Most towns do that—but scarcely ever with such persistence. Rows and rows, all the same, and, when you would

imagine that you were emerging from them, again rows and rows.

Greycaster is the oldest. It stands stolidly on the side of its wide murky river, for ever attempting to push through that giant overgrowth of its Victorian buildings the few evidences of its age. There is the Castle, a square and lordly pile once, now a deserted block of masonry with black window-holes as though its eyes were long gouged out by hungry rooks. And round its foot has been made a public garden! Grey asphalt paths encircle it with metal seats and warnings to keep off the grass. In the centre stands a discoloured and deserted bandstand. Perhaps once in the solid mass of the last century the place was used for recreation. Nowadays the Castle grounds are left to some meagre pigeons and the people who eat their lunches there from paper bags.

The Cathedral has been repaired and renovated into the likeness of an immense American chapel, and planted in the centre of its nave, cutting out all sight of the East, is a terrific organ.

These two buildings remain, surrounded by the square grey houses which old Whittaker built large enough to hold the furniture of the period. Trams groan through the High Street and rattle over points, and on the slopes down to the river which before his time were cow pastures, there are tall gloomy villas looking over an armaments factory.

The High Street itself makes the keenest attempt to ally Greycaster to Canterbury and Salisbury and other Cathedral towns. Scarcely a shop there which is not named to assist the illusion—"The Cathedral Butchery", "The Castle Bookshop", "Odo's Drapery", and so on. But what has been a more profitable myth is that of Charles Dickens. He stayed, or lived, or worked, or spoke—it is impossible to remember which—in the town of Greycaster once. And it claims to be the scene of one of his novels. So here is the "Charles Dickens' Curiosity Shop", "The Pickwick Fish-Store", "The Nickleby Garage", and a dozen other memories of the writer.

Smetham is a noisier place, its roads at night crowded by sailors and marines, with glaring picture-palaces and a theatre or so throwing light over its pavement. Fried-fish shops abound and large public-houses, a public lavatory and a town hall almost indistinguishable in size and architecture. Smetham is a busier and a cheaper shopping-centre than Greycaster, but as a residential district it is considered inferior.

And Hillingly—the third town—somewhere among its rows of houses is a street or so of shops. You will never find them. Only one feature stands out in retrospect from the rest—a thing called Moab's Tower. It is the foundation of a gigantic building in yellowish grey brick, begun late in the last century by the Moabites, an extraordinary sect which anticipated an almost immediate end of the world. Whether they were to build it up and reach heaven like the architects of the Tower of Babel, or whether, as one story goes, they were to take refuge in it and so be saved as true believers when humanity perished, it is hard to say. At all events their funds ran out when their building was about three storeys from the ground, and it is half fallen into decay, so that the immense trump of doom, twenty feet long, in the masonry of its front wall, alone survives to remind passers-by of the tower's original purpose. It is used now as a tennis club and as a bus-stop, so that one hears the inhabitants of Hillingly ask for "Two to Moab's" as coolly as though it had never been intended as the only way to reach salvation.

"The Three Towns" they are sometimes called, though they are a hundred and fifty miles and half a century from Mr. Bennett's immortal Five. None of your tuneful looms here, none of your midland factory-smoke and slums, but stark respectability stretching its ugly paws in all directions so that the southern county in which they stand is contaminated for miles by their gloomy outskirts. "Once there was a cornfield"—once Greycaster was a little market town, and Smetham resounded with nothing more metallic than the sound of

ship's carpentry when "Hearts of Oak" were built there. Once, incredibly, even Hillingly was a patch of pretty cottages.

It is idle to regret more leisurely days, idle to curse the architects employed so long ago by old Whittaker and his followers. They did their work, as solid buildings testify, with extreme thoroughness. They built houses for people to live in—and people live in them yet. Greycastrians come down their little paths, return to their mahogany dining-rooms, shop at the "Dickens Grocery", go to the Imperial Theatre, work in the dockyard or in shops or banks, behave, in fact, much as people do everywhere. And between one and another of them the difference, superficially at least, is negligible. Coming and going, they make haste to differ as little as possible from one another. They are honest, smug, tired people, with recreations, homes, and tastes to match. They allow generalizations galore, but they allow no headstrong individuality among them.

And midway in a straight road a hundred yards from Smetham High Street, stuck indistinguishably between neighbours, was the particular villa chosen twenty years before by Mary's brother-in-law, Robert Craig, to accommodate himself, his wife, and his then prospective son and daughter. When at last they reached its door, Aunt Eileen turned to Bruce. "Now if you'll hold this parcel, young man, I'll find my key."

He lived in the house which they entered for several years, but he never forgot that first coming into it. They had come up a tiled path divided from the house next door by a low stucco wall, with a heavily curtained bay window on their right. Aunt Eileen opened the front door, and Bruce found himself standing in a narrow hall whose light, coming through the red-and-blue square of glass which made the upper half of the front door, was dim. A bamboo stand, heavily laden with coats, projected into this passage, and in its centre a mirror, half obscured by clothes, was dark as a muddy pool. Over it all was a distinct smell of vegetables cooking.

"Hang your coat and hat up, Bruce. We must get you a new hat tomorrow ; that will never do in England. A cap, perhaps. And if you go in the morning-room there, you'll find your cousin."

Bruce, still a little dazed, looked round him. It was all scrupulously clean and tidy, but to him it was unreal —like a cave. Surely this dark hall could not be the mouth of a dwelling-place ? Surely he was not going to live here ? He wanted to break out—find the sunlight again. And he had not the least desire to "find his cousin in the morning-room". But he obeyed.

As he entered, Paula was sitting in the window with a book. His first impression was a pair of violet eyes in a pale, delicate face, and shingled hair the colour of ploughed earth with the sun on it. But Paula put her book down uncomfortably as he approached. "Lord !" thought Bruce, "she's shy !" He was not used to shyness. With his own assurance learnt in days when he had concealed a year or two's juniority from Argentine comrades, the girl's light blush surprised him. "You're my cousin Paula, aren't you ?" he said.

"Yes . . ." She was trying to say more, but nothing came.

He guessed her to be a year or two younger than he. If he had thought about it he would have admitted her to be pretty.

"What were you reading ?" he asked, having to ask something.

"It's a boy's book," she said, holding up a guilty threepenny. "It's a Broncho Bill story. I love them."

Bruce sat down. "What's a Broncho Bill story ?" he asked.

"Oh, about cowboys and the Wild West. Mother says you come from a country like that."

He became aware of something between awe and eagerness in her look. "I come from Argentina," he said, "but I haven't done much broncho-busting, you know."

"Could you ?"

"I dare say. I can ride a horse. Do you ride a horse in England ?"

"Oh no, I never have. Once, a long time ago at the seaside, I rode a donkey ; a whole shilling ride I had, and the man couldn't keep up. I hit it with a stick and it galloped ever so fast. I've never forgotten it. It was glorious !"

Bruce smiled. "What do you do all day here ?"

"I go to school."

"What, to the National School ?"

Paula was horrified. "Gracious, no !" she said. "I go to Miss Clark's school in Dymchurch Avenue. What sort of a school did you go to in Arg . . . Argen . . ."

"Argentina ? First I went to *Escuela Nacionál*, then to a Jesuit College."

"Jesuits ? Aren't they sort of Inquisitors ?"

Bruce smiled. "We used to say so," he replied.

Just then Aunt Eileen returned, followed by a little old lady dressed in black. She had a shrewd face, with delicately formed features—and perhaps it was the ebony stick she carried which gave the suggestion of a small witch with a sense of humour. She looked fixedly at Bruce while Aunt Eileen glanced from him to Paula.

"Made friends ? That's right. Bruce, this is your Great-Aunt Pittery."

"I hear you're coming to live here," said the old lady, speaking very quickly and precisely. "Well, we shall be fellow-pensioners. I'm in this workhouse, too." She turned to Aunt Eileen. "Tell him I'm sane, please, Eileen. You know you always explain me away to people."

"Your great-aunt often says more than she means, Bruce. You know she writes stories sometimes," she added, as though that explained everything.

"Your great-aunt does nothing of the sort. She says exactly what she intends to say, and you can't call them stories. Besides, she has been known to disguise her feelings." She smiled quickly. "I'm all right till I get tedious, as my second husband used to tell me, dear boy.

So you've come from South America. A dull place, I gather. But you seem to have survived without losing all your *joie-de-vivre*."

"What's *joie-de-vivre* ?" smiled Bruce.

"It's what Paula lacks, thank God. And what are you going to be ?"

"I don't know." Then as an afterthought, perhaps because he felt that he must catch this old lady's attention, he said, "Sometimes I think I could write . . ."

"Now, Bruce," put in Aunt Eileen, "don't talk nonsense, dear. It's time we were all getting ready for supper."

But Great-Aunt Pittery ignored her. "Write ? Why of course he will. Do the latest thing in unexpected adjectives, Bruce, and you're made. I may say that I'm satisfied with you."

Bruce smiled again at her. It was his first happy moment in that house.

"Now, Bruce, you'd like a wash," said Aunt Eileen busily. "You'll find the bathroom on the half-landing. And don't dirty the towels."

He did not reply, but left them and went upstairs, heart-sick again, and wretchedly lonely. Only the little old lady seemed to have understood him at all, and Aunt Eileen treated her as though she were slightly mad. He felt as though he had been led into some new and ugly country, like one of those grotesque hinterlands created in one's mind by the sound of discordant music, where beings are inhuman and malformed, and the air thick with evil smells.

At the foot of the stairs when he came down Aunt Eileen had paused. "You'll have your supper with Paula in the morning-room, Bruce," she said pleasantly.

"Perhaps Bruce is accustomed to dining with his mother," put in Mrs. Pittery tersely.

"Oh, he'll get used to our English ways," smiled Aunt Eileen.

A laconic female whom Paula addressed as "Nanny" brought their meal into the morning-room, where in

surroundings of pushed-aside school-books, an ink-stained carpet, and crowded cupboards, they sat down.

"She used to be my nurse," explained Paula, when "Nanny" had departed.

"Oh," said Bruce despondently, eying an old rocking-horse collapsed in a corner.

"This used to be my nursery," said Paula, watching him closely.

"I see."

They ate in silence for a while. Then suddenly Paula jumped up and buried her face in a cushion. Her shoulders shook. This was an incomprehensible situation for Bruce. He was embarrassed as much as puzzled.

"I say, what's the matter ?" he asked.

Paula did not answer, and he crossed the room to her.

"Paula, what's up ?"

"You think I'm just a baby," she said, when she had choked back the sobs enough to speak. "I can't help your coming to my nursery. It's not my nursery now ; I'm fourteen."

"I don't think you're a baby," he said.

"Yes, you do, because of Nanny. Anyway, she's called Agnes now. She's the servant. I forgot. I wanted you to think I was half grown up. Mummy let me have my hair shingled last week. And now it's all spoiled. And I've cried, too !"

"That's nothing," said Bruce. "Why, Julio's sister right out on the pampas cried once . . ."

She sat up, her eyes glistening with tears, and her mouth a little open.

"One of the cowboys" (he did not say *gauchos*, she wanted cowboys) "was lamed by a brute of a horse, and when Lindita heard about it, she cried too."

"Did she really ? You don't think I'm a baby, then ?"

"I shall if you cry any more. Come and finish your supper." He felt years older than Paula.

Later Aunt Eileen returned.

"I should like to go out for a bit," said Bruce. He

was stifled and eager for air, for a long striding walk, for anything that would take him out of this house.

But Aunt Eileen was horrified. "Oh, that wouldn't do at all," she said. "You don't know your way about Smetham yet. Besides, after your journey you want a good night's rest. Perhaps another evening your uncle will take you out, and if you're a good boy it may be to the pictures. And, anyway, he wants to have a little talk with you this evening. So say good night to Paula and come down to the drawing-room."

That "little talk"! For years it rankled with Bruce, and even when he could laugh over it, it was not without bitterness that he did so. But when he had come to understand that household, as in the end and in a manner he did, his resentment was not against his aunt and uncle.

They were alone, the three of them. Uncle Robert was a small, untidy man, with a harassed forehead and none of his wife's complacency. For him life was full of grievances which only occasionally became definable, and then usually incorrectly so. He now held a high position in a large printing works, was clever in his calling, and industrious. With his own family he was unable to cope —but that did not matter greatly, as Aunt Eileen took the burden on her own shoulders.

Both of them were born and brought up in Greycaster and Smetham—an honest son and daughter of the towns. Searching deep in the uneventful chaos of their lives, the placid bed, breakfast, dinner, tea, supper, bed, of the last twenty years, one might grudgingly find some fine quality of—courage, was it? Or inter-reliance? Something which had enabled them to keep together through one after another of the blackening misfortunes, as they had seemed, the small terrors of keeping house and bringing up a family. It had always been a matter of ways and means, but to them the interminable discussion of them had never been past bearing. Late into the night, early in the morning, they had wondered how bills were to be met, how the education of their children should be done,

where they should purchase household necessities, how they could economize or invest. They had always met their obligations, and though they had grumbled and grieved over sudden obstructions, it had never occurred to them to question powers like God, Fate, Health, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Right and wrong had definite meanings for them. For their own they had suffered and schemed, and would suffer and scheme to the end. For the rest of the world they had a hidden hostility and suspicion. Friends and acquaintances came to their house, but in their reception of them there was always something guarded.

The long contest had left its ugly marks, and unfortunately it was these that were most obvious to a stranger like Bruce. Such phrases as "Your uncle can't afford . . ." became very familiar to him, and the flustered meanness of Uncle Robert, his overfed irritation and turkey-cock lecturing in peevish circumstances, were natural enough, but to Bruce, too young for tolerance, they were nothing more than *antipatico*.

But he had learnt none of this that first evening when he was called in for a "little talk". He just sat miserably in an uncomfortable chair, with his legs twisted beside him, quite at a loss. He was suddenly faced with forces which he did not understand. Vaguely he realized that to these people expense, even the expense of feeding and clothing him, was a matter for deep consideration and calculation. Beyond that he comprehended nothing.

"Now, Bruce," his aunt began, "we want you to try to understand the position. You are getting a big boy now, and you must try to realize things. Your uncle and I want to give you a home. Don't we, dear?"

"Well, you have nowhere else to go, you see, and your aunt is your mother's sister. I'm not in a position to undertake it really, but we feel we must do our best."

"You see, Bruce, your dear mother never had much idea of money, or you would not be unprovided for."

"Well, she didn't know my father would be killed," broke out Bruce.

"People should always be prepared," said Aunt Eileen. "For we know not the day nor the hour. But as I was saying, your mother never understood money. Now your uncle and I have not always had an easy time, and things, as you know, are expensive in England."

"Very expensive," said Uncle Robert, in a rather depressed voice. "And with income tax as it is . . ."

"So you see it is not altogether as easy for us to receive you as we should like. And you must do your very best to help us as much as you can."

"Can't I get a job or something ?"

"No, Bruce," returned Aunt Eileen, "you're not old enough for that yet. You will go to school for a time and learn English ways a little better. Then we'll see what we can put you into."

Bruce said nothing. He was trying to adapt his mind to this matter.

His uncle continued : "You see, my boy, we don't live as no doubt you lived in South America—with very little thought for the morrow. Your aunt and I have to consider the future. Tom, who is away at school now, must be given his chance in life, and Paula must be thought of. I've sacrificed a great deal," he complained. "I never think of my own pleasure. So you must do your best to be a help to us."

"You will, won't you, Bruce ?"

"Oh yes, Aunt Eileen," said Bruce a little wearily.

When he got to bed that night, Bruce found to his chagrin that tears were in his eyes. It was little more than a month since he had ridden over the pampas with Julio, and now, suddenly, he seemed to have learnt so much, such terrible things. If growing older is a matter of experience and not of mere time, years had passed between his arrival at Waterloo and his solitude at last in his room in Burnley Road.

For until now he had known scarcely any restraint. Without being much more than normally selfish, he had never had great cause or opportunity for considering others, except his mother, whom he adored. A hedonist

in an open-air way, quite pagan, full of passionate loyalty to such ideas as his mother had given him, he was fired with the sort of longing patriotism which only a youth brought up in an English home abroad, or living abroad in an impressionable period, can feel. He had that far-away, uncomprehending, but full-hearted devotion to something called England which must have got hold of young Kipling in India, and which makes the colonial the most zealous imperialist.

He had always done what he liked. At the age of ten, or thereabouts, for instance, he participated in the offering of a sacrifice. He had been playing with Julio and Lindita, his friends, along the stretches of grass and willow trees beside the Rio de la Plata. It was in the burning heat of the Argentine midday, and the three of them were lying full length in the shade, when Julio, who was by two years Bruce's senior, said, "This might be Greece. This is like the places I've read about. They offered sacrifices."

"What are they ?" asked Bruce.

"Why, in those days Our Lady was not heard of, and the Greeks ruled the world. They were fighters. They had a god called Pan, who had feet like a goat and horns. What's the matter, Lindita ?"

"Do gods have horns ?"

"This one had."

"I thought only devils had horns."

"Well, Pan was a sort of devil. But he was a god, too. He had pipes he used to play on. He was rather terrible, but his music was fine. And to please him the Greeks offered sacrifices. They'd get a bullock and roast it."

"And what's happened to the Greeks now ?" asked Lindita.

"They're all dead. It's hundreds of years ago."

"And what's happened to Pan ?" asked Bruce. "Gods don't die," he added.

"That's what I'd like to know. When I read about it the other day I wondered that. Perhaps he's about still, only nobody worships him now."

"I say, do you think he is ? He must be angry with everyone !"

They lay still, the hazy air full of insect-drone weighing heavily on them. It was the hour of the siesta, and the few bare-footed fishermen who lived in huts mounted on poles in that swampy area were probably dozing. The gilded landscape itself seemed in wrapt and lazy contemplation, for South America, like its people, sleeps only in the early afternoon. Far out, where the line of the river was thin and glittering as a wire, there were a few bronzed figures beside a black carriage, for one of the coachmen from San Isidro had driven down here with two comrades to bathe. The patient, stocky horse, the black cab, and the tiny far figures alone broke the skyline, since the river was still and molten.

"I say," said Julio presently, "why shouldn't we try ?"

"Try what ?" Bruce's mind had drifted away from Pan.

"Try to do what they did. Offer a sacrifice."

"How ?"

"Out here nobody would see us. We could build an altar and steal one of those lambs from old Perez's *chaco*. Then we'd kill it and offer it on the altar !"

"Wouldn't be right," said Lindita firmly.

"Why not ?"

"What would Padre Muñoz say ?"

"Oh, Padre Muñoz be hanged ! Let's do it."

"I'll help," cried Bruce excitedly. "Only you'll have to kill the lamb. I won't do that !"

"All right. But we must wait till it's dark. About six o'clock."

Bruce ran home soon afterwards to tea with his mother, having promised faithfully to meet Julio and Lindita at the appointed time. They wanted him to stay with them, for they intended to go farther up the shore and bathe, but he shook his head. His mother was waiting for him. He had an almost prim sense of time and obligation where she was concerned, and he had to be home at half past four.

He loved his mother. Even at ten years old nothing

else counted very much against that lovely and tender lady who understood everything, forgave everything. Once or twice he remembered, she had almost frightened him, when she had come to his bed at night and hung over him crying and holding him. But more often she was demure—sitting in the *patio* sewing and talking to him. And when he was not out with Julio and Lindita it was near her that he liked to play. He liked to bring his toys within reach of her feet, for she would ask questions about the game and understood soldiers. It was so much better to win a pitched battle with his blue-coated lancers when she was looking on. It was so much better to do anything while she was looking on.

But the years he had spent with the Argentine children had taught him a Latin reserve, so that although he did not consciously deceive his mother, he did not tell her everything. He did not mention that afternoon, for instance, that at sundown he was going to take part in the offering of a sacrifice. But at the appointed time he padded out of the front door and ran down the steep road towards the river shore. His lips were set, and in the wet blueness of his eyes there was nothing but enthusiasm—an eager set look in the direction of his meeting-place with Julio and Lindita.

They were waiting for him beyond the last houses at the foot of the hill. The sun had gone down with Southern abruptness, and the white-clad figure of Lindita, the taller and broader one of Julio, were only shadows now. They saw the river down an avenue of trees, a glimpse of distant silver, for under the foreign stars it had become molten and worthy of its name. Out of the waste ahead of them came continuously the bizarre sound of the bull-frogs, like a chiming of cracked bells, and, from the willows, the *bichufeos*, the taunting night-birds, cried redundantly. Bruce was not frightened, only feverishly excited, as they set off for the *chaco*, far too excited to notice that it was his hand that Lindita held as she ran on with fearful dark eyes beside him. Silently they approached the sheep-pen of old Perez.

Suddenly, when the white shapes of the animals showed about them, Julio paused. "Do we dare ?" he asked.

"We must now," said Bruce.

They plunged among the sheep and seized one long-legged lamb, then carried it bleating into the shadow of the woods.

"Kill it now, quick !" said Bruce.

"I can't. It's too big to kill. What a big life to take ! I can't. I thought it would be like squashing an insect."

But Bruce's eyes were distended. "Go on ! Quick !" he cried. *"Estupido ! Cobarde !"*

Julio got out a knife. "Hold it, then !" he said fiercely.

"What are you going to do ?"

"Slit its throat."

Lindita began to cry. "Don't kill it," she begged. "Poor little thing ! Give it back to its mother !"

"Bruce called me a coward. I will kill it now," said Julio.

"Yes, kill it quick. I've got it firmly. Quick, Julio !"

Julio stabbed and cut several times, and there was no more bleating. "I'm covered with blood !" he said.

"Never mind. Come on ! Come on ! We'll burn it now. We'll take it to the circle of trees." Bruce's eyes still shone. "I'd love to have been a Greek," he said.

They hurried on to the place, leaving a trail of blood behind them. Julio carried the carcass, Bruce ran ahead, Lindita followed, weeping. They found the place and laid the lamb in the undergrowth, while they made a heap of stones and sticks. It took them some time, and Bruce kept saying impatiently, "Come along. It's getting late. We must have it burning." At last they had their altar and a pile of wood on top.

"Got that spirit ?" Julio asked his sister.

Lindita produced a bottle of petrol and they poured it over the wood and the carcass.

"Ready now ?" asked Bruce, the matches in his hand.

"It should have a garland," said Julio.

"What's that ?"

"A ring of flowers round its neck."

"We'll find some."

All they could find was honeysuckle, but they strewed it on, and at last laid a match to the wood. The flames leapt from the petrol, and they jumped back.

"Now, then," Julio said. "We must dance and sing !"

"But I can't dance," sobbed Lindita.

"Don't be silly, you must. What shall we sing ? Oh, quickly, say something we all know."

They did not all know anything except "Tipperary", so they sang that, with hands clasped and bare legs skipping round their altar. They had half forgotten the Greeks and Pan, and the idea they had set out with, conscious only of a frightening, strange sense of drama. A curious trio—Julio flushed, exultant, blood-stained, his lank hair over his face, taking sudden leaps into the air ; Lindita between the two, very woebegone, still crying a little, trying to sing ; Bruce concentrating on the song, remembering the words, singing loudest.

Soon afterwards Bruce was sent to the local *Escuela*, the democratic national school in which the children of San Isidro, irrespective of class, sex, or nationality, were gathered daily. Everyone had to wear a white coat, like a barber's, so that invidious distinctions in dress were hidden. Every morning he would set off, meeting Julio and Lindita on the way, and sometimes arriving at school —sometimes not.

Next door to the white sleepy building, from which the droning chorus of children repeating the *Himno Nacionál Argentino* came somnolently out to the sunny street, was a café. And before Bruce was fourteen he had discovered that it was far pleasanter to spend his mornings in it playing billiards with a crowd of *compañeros* than to sit and yawn through interminably patriotic lessons. So he and Julio and two or three more Josés and Juans would turn in through the bead curtains to the cool, timbered room, order ices and light their cigarettes.

He nearly always lost at billiards—the Argentine boys were uncannily good. But he found it easier to lose than they did, and they liked him for that. At first they had held him at arm's length a little—a foreigner. Why did he come to their school when the other English boys went to a hybrid institution run by a Cambridge man up the road, they asked him.

"*Mi madre,*" explained Bruce, "she wants me to be at this school. She doesn't like the *ingleses* here."

"*Pero es inglesa.*"

"Yes—but she doesn't like the *porteños ingleses.*"

That was readily comprehensible. They did not like the local English people themselves. Bruce remembered how Argentine children used to call after him : "*Inglés—Pata Revés*" ("English—feet reversed", whatever that meant). To which he had learnt the retort : "*Argentino —Cara de torsino!*" ("Argentine—bacon-face!"). But such interchanges were forgotten. With a few reservations he was accepted by his school-fellows as one of themselves.

But after a few years of this his mother told him that he must be disciplined, and Bruce found himself removed to a Jesuit college. There he learnt. The Fathers knew how to get good stiff doses of classics into him. And there were organized athletics. So that at sixteen, Bruce, under a system that "sent him to bed tired", was scarcely aware of puberty past.

Certainly he dressed very carefully, as was the way among his friends, and talked a great deal about women. But for him such talk had no relationship to life. Stories which culminated in surreptitious laughter may have been about women—but they were certainly about no woman he had ever set eyes on, and he would have been scandalized beyond words if he had thought they could refer to any flesh and blood female of his acquaintance. In spite of the frankest lewdness in the long coffee-stirred talks he shared in cafés, when a few of them escaped from the paternal vigilance of their priests, he scarcely gave a real thought, and no imagination, to the other sex.

In his last Argentine summer he and Julio went to

stay on one of Tito's *estancias*. Their month alone there left a deeply burnt impression on Bruce's mind. He remembered his first glimpse of the house, white and squat, lying carelessly among a few trees. He respected and liked the *gauchos*, those dark, buffalo-like herdsmen who looked so leathery and sullen, and were capable of such flashing tenseness at times. He rode the long-nosed, ugly, lovable Argentine horses, moving for ever at the steady canter which is the only pace they know. And although unconsciously he was happily aware of the unique and spacious beauty which grudgingly reveals itself to strangers on the pampas—the beauty of infinite green plains, gold in the day, at night fading to silver, which stretch away and away, till sense of distance is lost and one can scarcely realize that immeasurably far ahead, like the rim of the world, the clouded Andes stand.

Once, when he and Julio had ridden half a dozen miles from home and come on a lonely stream under a few scorched trees, Bruce suggested that they should bathe. They unsaddled their horses and set them to graze while they stripped, cursing the flies that settled on their warm skins. For half an hour they swam and dived, calling to each other to watch this or that feat, singing snatches of songs, throwing water over each other, glad of its coolness. Contrasted they were, Bruce tanned, with his fair hair grown limp from immersion, Julio brown and black-headed; Norse and Latin unmistakably. They lost sense of time—sat on the ledge, plunged in again, laughed.

Then Bruce suddenly leapt to his horse and cantered a hundred yards across the pampas, thrilled unconsciously by the primitiveness of it, boy and horse, with no more harness than a rein. He shouted to Julio, then, digging vigorously at the beast's flanks with his heels, he drove it full forward into the stream with a splash that wet the trees fifteen feet above. *"Magnifico!"* he bellowed . . .

But as later they rode homeward in the inevitable early starlight, sobered by clothes, Bruce was silent. Perhaps it was mere reaction to the excitement of those moments on

horse-back, or perhaps he was oppressed by some presentiment that this pagan liberty must be ended ; that sooner or later a world of circumstance and time and necessity must close about him.

"It is good to be able to do what one likes," Julio said, but Bruce did not answer.

That first night in Smetham, as the outlines of the yellowish wallpaper gradually faded from his consciousness, Bruce remembered such days in the South. And it was not for a long time that sleep eventually came to him.

He awoke to the abrupt realization that he was in a small room at the back of Aunt Eileen's house. He turned round and saw that by the alarm clock on his mantelpiece it was nearly seven. He remembered his aunt bringing it to his room the night before. "We're always up in good time in the morning, Bruce," she had said. "You'd better set this at seven to make sure." He remembered an old picture that had hung in his room in South America, a highly coloured supplement to a Christmas annual. It had depicted the Watch in warm leathery clothes, holding a storm-lantern over the snow and calling, "Eight of the clock and all well." It had been part of his England. He had not expected to have a rubicund man with a bell calling outside his window, but the spirit of the thing he had trusted. He felt that he had been betrayed.

He yawned and turned over, trying to hope that he had made a mistake about the time, and that the alarm bell would not ring for another hour. But just as a cloudy sleepiness came to him, it began. At its first rally he jumped out of bed. That is to say he actually jumped out in his mind. His body remained quite still. "That's bad," he thought. "Ought to have control over one's limbs. Mind over matter." Then he pulled the clothes up round his ears again. The alarm clock was of the repeater variety. It made its second assault almost at once. "Oh, blast it!" thought Bruce, and again almost got out of bed. He even pushed a foot from the sheets,

but as he did so the clock subsided. Bruce closed his eyes and wandered off through space. He did not care about the clock. Let it ring. Let it ring itself out—he did not want to begin another day. It started again. He was a in a sleepy raging state of indecision. Suddenly, as it began its fourth chime, he heard the door of his aunt's room open, and her feet flapping down the passage.

"Bruce! You should have turned off your alarm," she said, outside his door. "It disturbs Uncle Robert. I believe you're still lying in bed!"

Bruce rose wearily from between the sheets and applied the silencing catch, then stood yawning and listlessly scratching his flesh. From where he stood he could see the roofs of several rows of Smetham houses, and countless heads of chimney-pots. Some of them blew a thin wisp of smoke into the air, so that he could imagine at their fireplaces a sleepy, half-dressed woman prodding the coals. The morning was wet and misty and there was no sign of the sun yet. "Beastly, beastly roofs," he thought. "Oh, why do people live in places like this—all next door to each other, all the same?"

The front of the house looked out on a wide, superior roadway, where every house had its trim little piece of garden, but his room faced the back, and from where he stood he could see the narrow, dirty street that was called Adelaide Road, and seemed exclusively devoted to cats. Opposite to him was a fruit-shop, and he could catch the colour of oranges in the windows. Somehow they looked depressing in the early morning light.

Bruce pulled on a dressing-gown and made for the bathroom. It was fair-sized and combined the offices of water-closet and bathroom—a fact which he resented. It was tiled with a yellow and green pattern, and the towels were scanty. The water was little more than tepid, but he slipped off his pyjamas and stepped into it. He found he had to keep still as the bath needed re-enamelling. He scrubbed himself with a glum determination to get some life into his body, then rubbed himself down vigorously. In South America he had enjoyed his bath; he had an

affection for his own body, had stood in front of a glass and moved his limbs this way and that to bring the muscles up under his tanned skin. But here, in this room, he felt it would be almost indecent to hesitate, as though he had undressed in public. He rubbed warmth into his limbs, pulled on his dressing-gown, and returned to his bedroom, hearing, as he came down the passage, the sound of suction as the last of his bath water went down the drain.

He dressed slowly, and about him in the house the family was astir. By the time he had done his hair and put on his jacket they had all gone downstairs. Before he opened his bedroom door he hesitated. He had a curious, almost occult feeling that when he had joined them in the dining-room he would be among them inevitably, and that the last of his freedom, the last link with the past, would be broken. This household was open to him, and behind it lay the sunlight, and there was only one thing to do. Like a prison gate the door of the dining-room seemed. Once through, the only activity left for his mind would be a way of escape. Irresponsibility was over. With an impatient jerk he pulled back his bedroom door, ran downstairs, and plunged into the dining-room.

CHAPTER III

MARY

MARY had not meant to go up to Burnley Road for some days, but that afternoon she arrived there at half past three, feeling as though her separation from Bruce were already long-established. The servant informed her that only Mrs. Pittery was in. Mary remembered her aunt, and went into the drawing-room to see her.

The little old lady pointed to a chair opposite to the window and looked at her niece critically. "Well, Mary," she said, as though in the seventeen years since they had met Mary had only been out to a prolonged children's tea-party, "enjoyed your married life ?"

Mary smiled. "I didn't have much," she said.

"Of course not. I always knew that young man was virtually impotent."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. He drank."

"Same thing—in the end. But he did well with Bruce."

Mary's face lightened. "Do you think so ?" she said.

"Of course. A fine boy. I liked him at once. But what on earth have you sent him to this mausoleum for ?"

Mary was slightly confused. "Oh, I thought he ought to go to school over here, Aunt Pittery—for a time, at any rate. And Eileen undertook him."

"One of her charities, I suppose ?"

"Well, it's kind of her, isn't it ?"

"Kind ? Rubbish. You don't know the pleasure she's getting out of it. But I don't think it will do him any harm."

"I hope not."

"But you take care. These young people are selfish, you know." She quickly fingered the large garnet set in gold below the high lace collar of her black dress. Though, as I say, yours seems satisfactory. Eileen will be in in a moment. She's taken him out to get him some 'sensible clothes' !"

They both smiled.

"I know you'll watch him here, Aunt Pittery."

"You know nothing of the sort. My eyesight is execrable. And I'm far too old to do anyone any good, except to explode their illusions. I've popped off any that Eileen ever had about Robert," she added mischievously.

But Mary knew very gladly that since Great-Aunt Pittery had taken a liking to her son, he would have an ally. And not a negligible one. She looked round the room, and found it almost unchanged since she had visited Eileen after her marriage. The brass clock on the mantelshelf between its enormous modern Chinese jars, the flaccid carpet, worn very thin in places, the black woolly hearth-rug pulled up to the brass fender, the ugly, uncomfortable chairs and the queer Victorian divan—it was just as she remembered it. Even the jar of herbs on the mantelpiece, which had once given off a sweet wooden smell ("Popery," Eileen called it, "because it's such a mixture"), and, if she was not mistaken, the same lace curtains through which, at the side of the bay-window, Eileen could observe the front door ; nothing had changed. And Aunt Pittery, a little more bitter and incisive, a little older and more crow's-footed, but essentially the same small figure that had been the terror of her girlhood.

She heard the squeak of the metal front gate as Eileen and Bruce returned. There were greetings again. Eileen was pleased, she said, that Mary had come so soon. Bruce kissed his mother. Tea was brought. Mary watched.

"Well, there !" said Eileen, dropping a little exhausted into a chair. "We *have* had an afternoon. The shops were so crowded ; you could scarcely get round

Woolworths. I shall be glad of a cup of tea. Milk and sugar, Mary? And Bruce was quite particular over his things. I never knew such a boy for worrying about his appearance—aren't you, Bruce? And did you find some rooms, Mary?"

"Yes, in Fowl Row."

"What a district to have chosen! Goodness knows what they'll think of you, I'm sure. But if it was a nice clean room that's half the battle. And now you must Look Out for Something. Bruce, don't sit there doing nothing, there's a good boy. Hand the bread-and-butter to your mother and great-aunt. That's right. It was beginning to rain when we came in. I don't expect you like our weather, Mary. . . ."

But Mary scarcely heard. She was watching Bruce. The room had grown dull, for it was past five and the street was a dark one, but the last evening light through the lace curtains fell on his hair, and made his head a shining glow in the obscurity of a horsehair couch. Her golden boy! Once he looked across to her and smiled, and Mary knew he meant to say that they two at least understood, they two were the real friends, they two must suffer all this about them—the three-tiered cake-stand, the voice of Eileen, the photo of Uncle Robert on the wall—and could suffer it because they were really hand in hand. That was what he meant, and Aunt Pittery knew it too. She had cocked her small, inquisitive eye on Bruce while Eileen chattered on. Her golden boy! How fine he looked among this ill-lit, faded collection of property, how young among the three women!

Eileen was speaking to her, determined to have an answer. "You've not seen Paula yet, Mary? She'll be in in a moment. She comes back from school about now. . . ."

"I'm so pleased," said Mary. "I've looked forward to meeting my niece. . . ." Had she? Of course she knew Eileen had a daughter. She had scarcely thought about it. So long as she did not interfere with Bruce. . . .

Again the squeak of the garden gate. Mary wanted

to get away. She had seen Bruce in his new home, among them all; she wanted to go now. But it was Paula. Invertebrate, Mary decided. Rather pretty, rather lusciously pretty, but invertebrate. "Aunt Mary," she called her. All aunts here, Mary thought. Aunt Eileen, Aunt Pittery, Aunt Mary, talking and watching and wondering over the two young people, golden boy and meek girl. She would like to go.

"Perhaps Bruce will walk down the road a little way with me?" she said, half to Eileen.

"Yes. Put your coat on, Bruce, or you'll catch your death of cold."

"The boy's not consumptive," snapped Mrs. Pittery.

Nobody answered her, and Mary said good-bye.

Outside, Bruce caught her arm. Mary saw at once his troubled face turned to her. "Mother . . . it's awful!" She saw he could not say more.

"Never mind, darling. It's not for long. And they're kind, really."

"Not that so much. The *place*. Is this . . . England? Is it all like this?"

Mary was troubled. "Bruce, darling, don't. I can't bear it if you talk in that way. Of course it's not. This is just one ugly town. I couldn't manage anywhere else yet. You shall see later. We'll go to heavenly places. Just stick it out for a time, there's a darling. For my sake!"

"All right, Mother."

"Don't let them worry you. After all, it's only in little things. Talk to Aunt Pittery. She understands."

"Oh, I know. I like her."

"You must run back now, Bruce."

"Good-bye, Mother. Come up again soon."

She could hear sorrow in his voice. "I will, I will," she said hastily. "Good-bye, Bruce."

CHAPTER IV

BRUCE

A WEEK later they sent him to a local day-school, one of those large Government-supported, efficient institutions, with five or six hundred boys. The Classical School it was called ; it was highly equipped and staffed from the Universities. Bruce had explored it one morning on a walk through Greycaster, seen its big red brick buildings and quadrangle, and rather looked forward to the commencement of term, for he was lonely.

He was given a school cap, which he disliked. "What's it for ?" he asked Aunt Eileen.

"It's your school cap, dear," she said. "All boys wear them and are proud of their colours."

"I don't like them. Mother always said blue didn't suit me."

"That's a namby-pamby remark," Uncle Robert put in.

And when the first morning of term came he put it on and set off for the Classical School. It was eight-thirty or so, and in the High Street the shops were opening for the day. Clerks and assistants hurried through the noisy streets, and before the doors were dust-bins full of refuse. He bought himself some cigarettes and strolled to the side door through which the boys were passing. Some, to his surprise, seemed little more than ten. He went up to two boys of his own age and said : "I say, I'm new to this place. Where do I go to find out about things ?"

They stood still a minute looking at him. They seemed dumbfounded. "Go ?" gasped one.

"How do you mean ?" said the other.

"Well, I suppose you have grades or something. I want to know where I start."

"Oh, I see, well . . ."

"You mean you want to know what class you're in ?"

Bruce tried to stifle his exasperation. "Yes," he said.

"You'll be told later. Come on, Richards."

A bell from somewhere in the great dull-red brick pile of the school began chiming, and he followed the general stream of boys. He found himself in a large, galleried hall with a dais at one end, and took a place about halfway down its rows.

"I say," someone said to him, "you can't stay here. This is the fifth-form row."

"Well, what does it matter ?" asked Bruce, honestly puzzled. "There's tons of room !"

The first speaker, feeling a little out of his depth, appealed to the boys around him. "I say, here's a new boy pushed into the fifth-form row."

Bruce lost his temper. "Shut your bloody mouth," he said, "or I'll push your face in afterwards. *Sinverguenza! Idiota !*"

Whether it was the expletive or the Spanish he did not know, but this speech made its effect. The boys near enough to hear turned round and stared at him. The incident was the foundation of his repute. All the time that he remained at the Classical School he was never considered otherwise than as "a mad Argentine". The boys knew of the country of his birth from newspaper accounts, and regarded it in their light. They always half expected to see him draw out a revolver, or knife an unwary master between the ribs. They grew to like being with him to some extent, to be glad of him in the rugger team, and in sundry petty revolts, but they never really liked him or understood him.

He only made two friends at the Classical School. During his second month he became aware of "the Mouse". Hemmett was called that partly on account of his size and partly on account of his disposition. He was younger than the boys in his class because he was

cleverer. The son of a struggling doctor, a pale, delicate child, he was out of place among the heavier natures of Greycaster. Their faces, Bruce decided, were the faces of butchers, if a generalization could be made, and Hemmett's face was timid, wide-eyed, thin-lipped; the face of a small animal in a strange place. He was not bullied; as a rule he was just "the Mouse", ready to creep down any hole in a disturbance, ready to efface himself at the mere sight of the cat of school etiquette.

It was in the changing-room after a football match that he first came to Bruce's notice. There was a genial oaf called Rix, a big, smiling, lazy boy who played full-back for the second fifteen. He was liked in an off-hand manner—generous, incompetent. He came in and threw himself wearily on to a bench near Bruce, for it had been a strenuous game. Once during its struggle Bruce had got clean away with the ball, and only the long arm of Rix had brought him into the mud. And Bruce did not like mud. He did not for the moment like Rix. His side had lost. And less than anything else did Bruce like losing.

Rix sighed. "I wish you wouldn't make me hare about so much," he said to Bruce, but got no answer. He turned lazy eyes over the changing-room's litter and sighed again. "Can't be fagged to undo my boots," he said. "Here, Mouse! Take my boots off for me!"

Instantly the Mouse fell to his knees and started to undo the laces.

Suddenly there was a shout from Bruce. "*Nunca en la perra vida!*" he yelled excitedly. "Hemmett, get up! Leave the lazy swine's boots alone!"

There was a gaping silence. The Mouse looked up at Bruce and saw him standing, half dressed, muddy, with a little blood on his chin where his lip had been cut during the game, with an excited finger stretched out towards Rix's boots.

Rix smiled. "Kerry," he said good-humouredly, "you're a madman, you know. It's nothing whatever to do with you."

Meanwhile the Mouse, fearing Rix less than Bruce, had slipped away unobserved. Bruce did not reply to Rix, and fellows went on dressing. "That mad Argentine," they laughed. Rix took his own boots off. He did not really mind a bit, for he was very English; not in the least afraid of Bruce, not worrying.

Bruce went up to the tuck-shop to tea. He found the Mouse at a table buried in a book, as usual. He sat down beside him and said nothing. Then suddenly he exploded. "What in hell's name is wrong with you? Why do you go playing the slavey to those louts?"

"Oh, Rix isn't a bad chap. And I hadn't been playing. I didn't mind doing it for him."

"Can't you see—it's not that? It's the significance. Kneeling down and taking a chap's boots off!"

The Mouse did not often talk to anyone at school. But he did not lack a certain amount of moral courage.

"Well," he said, "you would never have interfered if you hadn't been mad with Rix because he collared you when you were nearly across!"

Bruce put down his bun and looked at the face turned accusingly to his. He knew that to some extent the Mouse was right. "Rot!" he said, and walked away. But all through the Maths. lesson that followed he thought it out. He had interfered with Rix because Rix had interfered with him in the game. But it had been Rix's job to interfere with him. It was part of the game. Had it been his job to interfere with Rix? Was Rix bullying? What would Rix have done to the Mouse if the Mouse had not obeyed? Probably nothing. Then what business had it been of his? And what a splendid little creature the Mouse was! To come out with a truth like that when he must have known how maddening the truth can be, and would be, to him then. He had made a hopeless fool of himself.

"I say, Rix," he shouted when they reached the school gates. "Doing anything on Saturday?"

"No. Free. Why?"

"Come round to my place to tea. It's dull, but we'll go to the pictures after."

"Thanks very much. I'd like to."

"Good. I'm asking the Mouse."

Rix smiled. "You *are* a mad Argentine!" he said cheerfully.

"I say, I'm English, you know," said Bruce.

It was an extraordinary tea-party. Aunt Eileen sat at the head of the table looking benignly capable and masking all her curiosity about Bruce's friends with the superiority of a thorough-going "grown-up". It was the first time anything like this had happened. Bruce had never even spoken of his friends at school, and when the Mouse—who had been the first to arrive—came into the drawing-room to be introduced, it had all seemed very right to her . . . a young boy like Bruce with a young friend. And Rix was a homely creature with whom she was quite pleased.

"Now, boys," she had announced, "tea's ready. Come along and just help yourselves."

A less independent boy than Bruce would have been embarrassed by his aunt; it never occurred to him to bother about what impression she made. It was, in fact, Aunt Eileen who had the shock. Hemmett turned out to be a very different person away from the school.

"Oh, Mrs. Craig," he said chattily, "what a wonderful tea-service! You must forgive my remarking on it, but I never can resist admiring a New Hall service!"

Aunt Eileen tittered gently. This was not quite what she anticipated from Bruce's young friends, and she was not certain whether the boy was not "trying to be funny" with her. "I'm glad you like it," she said.

"Of course, for ordinary use in the drawing-room, there's nothing like Limoges," went on the Mouse, "but for dining-room tea give me New Hall. *And* it goes with the walls."

"May I pour you out some more tea, Rix?" said Aunt Eileen.

"Thanks."

But the Mouse was irrepressible. "This reminds me of Brooke's 'Dining-Room Tea'," he said. "You know, Kerry :

> "When you were there, and you, and you,
> Happiness crowned the night. . . ."

But Bruce did not read Brooke, and Aunt Eileen had never heard of him.

"Who was Brooke ?" asked Bruce.

"Rupert Brooke was a poet who died in the war. He wrote some delicious things. Don't you know his sonnets ? Oh, Bruce, how have you LIVED ?"

And even Rix put in : "Oh yes. Bradley was talking about him in English the other day."

It was in vain that Aunt Eileen suggested a piece of cake. She was forgotten. The Mouse was burbling the first and last verses of "The Chilterns".

"The irony of it !" he exclaimed, rather flushed from the effort.

"Did you say one of your masters taught you that ?" asked Aunt Eileen.

"Not that one. But we learnt 'The Soldier' the other day."

"I should think not !" said Aunt Eileen. "It's not at all the sort of poetry for boys."

The Mouse looked quite hurt, but did not carry the discussion further. When tea was over Aunt Eileen said : "Well, I'll leave you boys to your talk. Only don't romp about and make too much noise, will you ?"

When the door closed both Rix and Bruce turned to the Mouse. They were amazed. It seemed absurd that a boy so insignificant at school should have "so much in him".

"You're always reading, aren't you ?" Bruce asked him.

"I read a good bit. It's great. You ought to."

But they lapsed into other topics, and Bruce started to speak of Argentina and grew enthusiastic over the joys of riding. And all the while Bruce was losing his

reserve and finding the desire to talk of himself growing stronger, so that when they went out into the murky evening they were friends. As they came down the pavement, their ugly school caps on the backs of their heads, the beginning of three partings visible under three peaks, with faces flushed and eyes a little distended in the excitement of such talk, with their ready-made clothes and their large boots, their recurrent laughter and absorbed chatter, they grew more hearty, laughed more mutually. And Bruce was conscious of it.

Outside the school he explored as best he might the district. It did not take long in Smetham to discover that his best chance of happiness lay outside it. He began to follow the ways out. One towards the east continued unchanged for miles, the trams pursuing him like monsters who rattled metallic scales to insist that the town was never far behind. But away to his left as he walked lay the river, wide and on fine days silvery, dotted with the terra-cotta sails of barges, and now and then a small liner to remind him of the South. When it was clear that view seemed fresh and windy with white dutch clouds racing the boats upstream.

Another way was towards the county town, and again it was long before the land was free of bungalows. Right up the wide tarred road they stretched, the silly little houses with their pseudo-rustic gardens. But after two miles or so they dropped off and he would reach the top of Primrose Hill. From here he could see half the county lying about him in untidy beauty—little roads running off into a green unknown and the promise of the sea far south. In spite of the buses and the stream of cars, he liked this walk, for there was space there, he could peer round and believe that, after all, the England his mother had promised him still existed, that Greycaster, Smetham, and Hillingly were not all. He saw himself following those roads away and away and never returning along them. Yet always there was the sure necessity of return—questions of time and school which sent him back to Burnley Road.

Another road led up the river—this was the bleakest of all. It had high chalky banks to the right, and beneath him were cement factories, one after another, grey and colourless, all the way to Hodley. He only went that way once.

But his walks gave him courage. There *was* a world outside.

He confided few of the thoughts that he enjoyed on those walks. Only to Great-Aunt Pittery he sometimes hesitatingly spoke. He had grown used to her bitter little sentences, and understood the kindness behind them.

"Restless," she said to him once. "Tired of pavements?"

"Oh no, Aunt Pittery. Only I want to start earning my own living."

"You've got plenty of years in which to do nothing else. Ninety per cent of humanity make it their life-work. Why begin too soon?"

"Oh, I don't know. I hate this place. I want to get away—anywhere."

"Well—get away. Take your mother."

"How can I without money?"

"Dear me! Don't begin talking like your uncle."

"Well, it's all very well. But you can't do anything without it."

"Then make it."

"How?"

"My dear boy, that's your concern. You're a male. And, anyway, what would you do if you had it?"

"I might go up to Oxford."

"It would have to be a lot of money."

"Mater wants me to do that. She wants me to get a Blue."

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Pittery. "Isn't it something to do with dancing?"

"Oh, don't pull my leg, Aunt Pittery. You know quite well!"

"But why Oxford, in the name of heaven?"

"Well, I want to learn. Everyone goes to Oxford or Cambridge to learn. There must be . . . ideas there."

"Oh yes," said Great-Aunt Pittery. "I dare say. They keep them in the Bodleian, I believe. Well, well, you have moderate ambitions. But there doesn't seem any great chance of your achieving them. I'm sure your uncle is 'not in a position' to help you very far."

"No," smiled Bruce. "But he could scarcely be expected to. He's poor."

"He's not wealthy."

"And there's Tom."

"Please don't remind me of unpleasing topics," snapped Great-Aunt Pittery. "Your male cousin is a barbarian. Thank God I never had children. My second husband was always for it, but I put my foot down. And I've got such enormous feet, dear. I dare say you've noticed."

Bruce smiled, unsatisfied, but somehow a little comforted.

The best way of escape was with the Mouse and Rix. In their comradeship Bruce lost most of the savage reserve he had learnt in Burnley Road. He never felt with them that utter freedom that had been his in San Isidro, with half a dozen young Argentines, for new and secretive imaginings had obsessed him too much lately for him to be quite irresponsible again. But the three boys managed to achieve once or twice a kind of coloured liberty together.

One Monday, for instance, near the end of his first—a spring—term at the Classical School, he came down to the dining-room to find himself the earliest. He started reading over the passage of Tennyson he had to learn for homework. Presently Paula came downstairs, and Bruce went on studiously with his "prep.". She came into the room and said, "Good morning, Bruce," looking full into his eyes. She had a habit of greeting him in that way as though she were watching the effect and seeing how he would reply. He resented it. Why

should she watch him like that ? He grunted back and went on reading, so that Paula picked up the paper.

"Ghastly accident yesterday," she observed.

"Mm ?"

"Quite near here."

They lapsed into silence, and again he had that uncomfortable feeling that she was observing him, wanting him to talk or something. He was almost relieved when Aunt Eileen came in. She smiled deliberately, and Bruce knew that she was going to be kindly.

"Well, Bruce," she said in the indulgent, superior way that he hated, "football today ?"

"I expect so, Aunt Eileen."

"You'll enjoy that, won't you ?"

"Rather !"

"And how are you, Paula ?"

"Splendid, thank you, Mummy."

"Daddy won't be a moment. I'll tell Agnes to bring breakfast in. I expect you're both as hungry as hunters."

Bruce smiled some sort of assent. How he detested these conversations at breakfast ! He could feel the sententious kindliness of Aunt Eileen in every sentence, and he was aware that Paula knew what he felt, and was sympathizing. And he did not want Aunt Eileen's kindliness nor Paula's sympathy. At last Uncle Robert came down—to carve the ham.

"My coffee's cold," he remarked to Aunt Eileen.

"There ! and I asked Agnes particularly. Shall I send it out and have it warmed, dear ?"

"No, it doesn't matter," said Uncle Robert tiredly. "Bruce, you left your bicycle out last night. I think you might take more care of it. Tom always cleaned it and put it away when he had it. I can't afford to buy new bicycles, you know."

Bruce sighed. "I'm sorry, Uncle Robert," he said. "I forgot all about it."

"It's a good thing I don't forget about things. I don't know where you'd all be if I did."

And again there was silence, broken only by Aunt

Eileen's "May I trouble you for the marmalade, Paula ?" and Uncle Robert's "Butter, please". When it was over and Agnes was piling the plates together, and Uncle Robert had lit a cigarette, Bruce went out to get his bicycle ready. It was far too early really, but he wanted to get away. As he wheeled it down the narrow asphalt path between the house and the wall of the neighbour's garden he heard the front door open and Paula call : "Bruce ! You've forgotten your Tennyson !"

"Oh, thanks, Paula," he said, and slipped it into his pocket. He cursed himself for forgetting the rotten book. Things like that were always happening—things that gave Paula a chance to do something for him. It was not that he disliked Paula, it was that . . . oh, he did not want her always to be so concerned about him. He hated thanking her. He wanted to draw down the blinds of his mind at home, and be at peace ; she was always coming in apologetically.

He cycled slowly down Burnley Road to the corner where the trams groaned round on their way to Greycaster. They always made that rasping noise as they took the bend, and afterwards he remembered it, long after he had forgotten many of the aspects of Smetham. It was at the next corner that he waited for Rix and the Mouse every morning. They came from different directions, and the three always went on to school together. Just as he had once waited for Julio and Lindita.

The Mouse was the first to arrive. He pedalled down the slight hill from his home when he saw Bruce, and leaned over the handle-bars and jammed on his brakes as he neared the corner. The arrival of the Mouse was always one of the best moments of Bruce's day. He seemed to come up bubbling with hitherto suppressed confidences, as though all sorts of interesting things had happened to him since their last meeting, and he was dying to tell Bruce about them. He was nearly always cheerful.

"Peter's late," he commented.

"Oh no," said Bruce, still a little uncommunicative from the effects of Burnley Road. "It's only twenty to nine."

"Then you must be early. Lord ! what a change !"

Presently Rix came towards them—but with unusual excitement on his round features. "I say," he said, "I'm damned if we go to school today !"

"What do you mean ?"

"Let's clear off to Pickham on our bikes. I'm sick of sitting on a bloody bench listening to beaks who spout for the sake of hearing their own voices. It's Monday, too. Come on."

They said nothing—just got on their bikes and rode out of the town as the mist lifted and the air promised that it would turn after all into a fine spring day. They remained fairly silent, except when Rix threw a few expletives to a small boy who made to step off the pavement, and the Mouse laughed. No long consultation had been necessary because they were in very good understanding of one another.

At Pickham they decided to buy some food. Bruce had a shilling, Rix five, and the Mouse sixpence. But Bruce did not even apologize. Another time he might have five shillings. Money adjustments between them at least were matters of small concern ; they could usually raise enough money between them to do what they wanted—have tea at a café, go to the pictures, or go to the second house of the Imperial. And if they had not, there were school-books to be collected and sold at ninepence a dozen, or an old pair of boots on which a shilling could be raised, or a worn suit which had been known to get as much as four-and-six. "God feeds the hungry," Bruce had once commented, as the Mouse parted with a silk hat of his father's for one-and-three, and Rix sold his oldest trousers for a shilling. They never worried. Today they bought pork pies and a cake, and three bottles of beer, then set out for Pickham Park. It was a particularly private estate, but Bruce had found it on one of his first escapes from Smetham, and it had become their surest refuge.

The sun was high up by now, and the air was warm and golden. High as their waists the scented foliage rose and spread its leaves to make an arched cave of the undergrowth. There were white stones on the ground, clean and naked, and a few dry violets defying the early spring wind. Everywhere the air was heavy with the scent of budding pine trees. True breezy spring—they might have been a hundred miles from Smetham, for there was nobody in sight or hearing, and they could hear the birds, whose song was definite and insistent to their ears, attuned as they were to the dull roar of traffic.

"What's wrong with this?" asked Rix, as they came to a spot more secluded than they had passed.

"It's all right. It'll do," said Bruce.

They put down their parcels.

"Damned good to get away," he added. "Quite an inspiration of yours, Peter."

"I know. I felt I couldn't face another day's school just yet," said the Mouse. "I probably shouldn't have thought of this, though. Come on, let's have lunch."

They cut up the pork pies and dismissed them. They drank the beer, Bruce indifferently, Rix with relish, the Mouse heroically; then, the food finished, they lay back to their cigarettes.

"Why can't we always be in places like this?" asked Rix.

"Get sick of 'em," said Bruce.

And the Mouse, after a pause, said: "I say, do you think one gets sick of everything in life? Eventually, I mean?"

It was an awful thought, and took time to be considered.

"I can't imagine myself ever getting sick of rugger," said Rix at last.

"Oh, I can," Bruce answered.

"Yes, Bruce will. Bruce is the sort that'll get sick of everything"—the Mouse was smiling—"and everybody too, I believe."

"Why Bruce more than me?" asked Rix. They always turned to the Mouse for their philosophy.

"Oh, you're—you'll always be a contented sort of bloke, Peter. You won't worry much. You'll never want a divorce. . . ."

Rix laughed. "You know a hell of a lot about divorce, don't you ?" he said.

"Not divorce, that doesn't matter, it's the people who do it. If Bruce ever marries, he'll never be faithful."

"I say . . ."

"Well, you won't. You couldn't. Because you're pretty hard, you know."

"Hard ? Me hard ?"

"Yes. You rather like hurting people."

"Look here, Mouse, you're talking drivel. I'm too soft-hearted. That's what's wrong with me. I have to live a lie day after day at home so as not to hurt my aunt's rotten feelings—or my cousin's."

"Talking about your cousin, Bruce . . ." Rix turned over on the grass and faced him.

"Don't. I don't want to talk about her."

"Why not ? She's a damn' pretty kid, you know."

"Paula ? Pretty ? Well, I can't say I've ever noticed it. I suppose she's got nice regular sort of features."

"Oh, don't be an ass ! She's really jolly nice, and you know it. She thinks a hell of a lot of you, too."

"Rot ! I wish she'd think of something else, anyway. It bores me. I sort of feel all the time I've got to be decent to her."

"Tell you a funny thing"—this from Rix. "Our scivvy's rather like that. She's always hanging round me. She's not bad-looking either. I believe if I wanted to I could do anything I like with the girl. . . ."

"Why don't you ?" asked Bruce.

"Oh, I don't know. I wasn't brought up in South America like you !"

"Well, what's that got to do with it ?"

"Well—you can't go getting pally with scivvies, you know."

"Don't see why not, if you want to."

"I don't want to—I mean I don't want to get pally. Sometimes I've thought of—well, you know. I've wondered whether I'd have the cheek to go to her room. . . ."

"Peter," said the Mouse, who had been chewing grass and listening, "I think you're over-sexed."

"Oh, shut up, Mouse," said Bruce. "That's that damned Freud you've been reading!"

The Mouse subsided again.

"Well, anyway, I'm not going to," said Rix. "I shall probably get married, as the Mouse says, and have scores of children, and live in Greycaster."

"If I ever get married," said Bruce thoughtfully, "I think I know who it would be."

"Good lord! What's this?" said Peter. "What dark secret are we to hear now?"

"Nothing at all," said Bruce. "You will be disappointed to know that she is thirteen or so. And I haven't seen her now for ages."

"Who is it?" asked the Mouse.

"A little South American girl. The sister of my friend out there. Her father and my mater were awfully pally, too. Lindita's her name."

"But . . . what makes you say you'd marry her, Bruce?"

"Dunno. Just feel it."

"Well," commented Peter after a silence which was slightly awkward, "we shall all be contented enough, I expect."

"We aren't likely to be that, ever," said Bruce, not quite sincerely.

"You're not. That's Peter's danger. Your danger is to go off the deep end."

When, some hours later, they came out into the suburbs there was a sunset, and the long grey streets of Greycaster took on a discordant crimson gilt, which shone in the eyes of people returning from factories and offices to their homes. The clatter of the traffic drowned their voices at times, but as they came down a more deserted street the

Mouse said, "I suppose there's some kind of beauty, you know, even in this."

"Where ?" asked Bruce dismally.

The Mouse pointed to the tall shape of the Moab's Tower, which had caught the rays of the invisible sun, and said, "Well, you know, if we were seeing that for the first time, and didn't know what it was, we should say it was lovely—an old grey ruin on a hill."

"But we do know what it is. We know it's a pleasure park," said Rix, "with crowds of stinking people about."

"Well, but I see the Mouse's point," said Bruce. "Either it's beautiful from here or it isn't, never mind what's in it. I say it is."

They came out on to a main road again, and could go no further in aesthetics. They parted at their corner, each for his home, with a prosaic, "See you tomorrow" apiece.

CHAPTER V

MARY

MARY had remained in Fowl Row a fortnight without finding a job. One morning, after breakfast, she discussed her difficulty with her landlady.

"Work?" said Mrs. Sobbins. "I don't know. It doesn't suit me. I'm inclined to have ulcers. But if you want it it must be about. It all depends what kind. My sister's in charge of the ladies' lavatory up at the station. There's a nice easy job. She sits and reads all day. But perhaps that's not what you want?"

"No. It is not."

"I don't see why not. There's no need to be particular. You can't afford to be particular in Smetham. It's not that sort of place. I never have."

"Still . . ."

"What you mean is you want a nice refined job? Well, how about a barmaid? That's lady-like. I've often thought of that myself. Only it means getting up in the morning. And dolling yourself up, which I could never be bothered. But it would suit anyone like you."

Mrs. Sobbins got up slowly from the chair by the fire in which she had been sitting. Mary was always fascinated against her will by her landlady's face—its peculiar texture of mottled flesh with little red veins running wildly about the cheeks and nose, its long, obstinate hairs round the chin. There was something macabre about it. "Yes," Mrs. Sobbins continued, gloomily plonking Mary's breakfast-things on to a tray, "it would be just the job for you. With all those clothes you've got upstairs you could get in one of the first-class hotels. Then you never know."

She hobbled out to the scullery with the tray and left Mary to contemplate the kitchen range and her last suggestion. There was something in it. If she could get in a small private bar of a theatre or one of the better hotels the work would not be as unpleasant as some of the things she had contemplated—being governess, for instance, or a lady's companion. The hours were not too long, she supposed, and the pay fairly good. She thought of Bruce. Would he mind? Would he hate to think of her doling out beer to innumerable men? But Bruce would hate her doing almost anything she had yet imagined. She would have to convince him that it was an innocuous game. On the other hand, would it do him any harm at school? Suppose the boys discovered that his mother served in a bar, would it spoil his chances? They never should discover. After all, Eileen was respectable enough.

Besides, she considered fondly, even if they did, it wouldn't worry Bruce. He wouldn't care a damn for their snobbery. He would laugh his way right through it. He would rather enjoy it—so far as school was concerned.

Anyway, it didn't so much matter what she did, Mary considered, sitting by the kitchen range. Because, anyhow, until Bruce started to work they wouldn't be able to live together. Only she must keep herself, and try to persuade Robert and Eileen not to let him leave school too soon. She would have liked him to go to the university. . . .

Mary forgot Mrs. Sobbins' kitchen. She thought of Bruce at Oxford. Dreaming spires, that novel had called it, that novel about the boy who was brought up by his mother, and went up to Oxford with plenty of money. Dreaming spires . . . a winding old city full of youth. And Bruce among those young men. That was what she wanted for him, a life beyond this fetid town, among fine young people whom he would like. And perhaps she would get it for him somehow.

"Here you are if you want it." Mrs. Sobbins had returned and was laying a paper down beside Mary. She

could see her dark-rimmed finger-nails on the grey print. "There's an advert. there for a 'lady to take charge of a bar'. That's what they call it. It can't be so bad. And your washing's come. Mrs. Hodson's done it. Her little boy's got scarlet fever. Nearly gone, he is. But she's got seven. We've had a lot of deaths in this street lately."

"Thank you," said Mary, picking the paper up.

"I must go out and do my shopping," mourned Mrs. Sobbins. "There's always something. No peace in Smetham. The valley of the shadow of death, my husband used to call it. I suppose it was for him." She disappeared again, her disproportionately wide buttocks filling the scullery door as she went through.

Mary turned to the advertisement. "Lady required to take charge of small bar. Apply Manager, Old Cow Hotel, Greycaster." Mary smiled. She remembered the "Old Cow". Seventeen years before it had been Geoffrey's favourite retreat. It was, in its way, a famous place, supposed to be the scene of an incident in one of Dickens' books. It stood at the head of Greycaster High Street, a Georgian building on an older foundation, and over its entrance were painted some words from the novel, *"Give me the Old Cow for comfort"—David Copperfield*, or something of the sort. And people came from distances to eat and drink in it, because Dickens used it once.

"A small private bar"—that did not sound so bad. Could she do it? Serve out beer all day? Pour out measures of whisky? Talk to Greycastrians about the weather? Perhaps she could. She had had enough alcoholic breath blown into her face by Geoffrey, anyway. She was used to that. She had had enough of his unsteady attempts to kiss her—she could repel those. Why not, then? If it was well paid, if she could save something for Bruce. As good as anything.

She went upstairs and put her hat on, standing a moment before the glass. Yes, she was young enough, and pretty enough, if it was a matter of that. She looked cool and capable. She would get the job if she wanted it.

She went out and hurried up Fowl Place to Naval Road, then took a bus to the "Old Cow". It looked solid and rather ordinary from the outside, but within there was a giant staircase, big, bad oil-paintings, heavy carpets, and an atmosphere of over-fed comfort. She asked for the manager.

"Have you come about the job in the bar ?" asked the girl in the office.

Mary nodded. So she looked like that, then. Good, that made it likelier that she would succeed.

"Just a minute. I'll tell Mr. Chase."

Presently the manager himself appeared, a nondescript little man in his forties. "You've come to apply for the job ? Will you come into my office ? Any experience ?"

Had she ? Mary wondered in a smiling flash whether her life with Geoffrey could be called experience. "I'm afraid not," she said.

"Oh, no experience ? Oh, I see." His voice shut down like the end of a wireless programme.

"But I'm sure I could do it," said Mary.

"Single ?"

"I'm a widow."

"Any children ?"

"One son. But he's not here."

The manager seemed to cogitate. "It's not difficult," he said. "There's only one tap. I suppose you could learn. Can you give references ?"

This had never occurred to her. She quickly thought of Robert, and named him. "Oh yes," said the manager indifferently.

The girl from the office put her head in the door. "Commander Wick wants to know if you'll have a drink with him," she said.

"Tell him I'll be there in a moment."

Mary felt the whole thing slipping away from her. She tried to smile. "Won't you give me a chance ?" she said.

The manager rose with the air of a man whom sterner duties called. "Very well," he said, and named the

wages. They were slightly less than Mary had expected. "Come along at nine tomorrow so that the young lady who's leaving can show you the ropes." He hurried out.

The girl in the office smiled. "Got it ?" she said.

Mary nodded. Pale sunlight had crept into Greycaster High Street when she got outside, and the labourers from the factory on the river were pushing past her to go home to lunch. There was no colour in sight. Not, it seemed, in the shops, or in the streets—all sober and dingy. What a town ! Oh, why had she brought her boy here ? He wanted his England, and she had given him Greycaster, Smetham, and Hillingly.

Thinking she would like to let Bruce know what she had done, she called in at Burnley Road on her way back and left a message for him. He was to meet her at Coulton's Café for tea at five o'clock.

She spent the afternoon going through her things. It was hard to find dresses suitable for the "Old Cow". She must look, she realized, "smart" as the gentlemen of Greycaster understood it. Most of the things that Bruce liked she laid aside as unsuitable. Tito's taste was nearer the mark, but rather too lurid. She had enough clothes that would do, anyway.

At ten to five she was seated in Coulton's Café awaiting Bruce. It was crowded with basket-laden women who ate poached eggs or cold ham with their tea. Eileens all, she thought.

At five to five he came, and with him, to Mary's annoyance, was Eileen herself. Couldn't she for once let her have her son alone ? She was coming forward, steering her plump bust past the heads of the busy tea-eaters. She was smiling and charitable. "I thought I'd like you both to have this little tea with me. Just for a treat," she said.

In her small-mouthed simper and in what she said was a suggestion of reproof to Mary for undertaking the extravagance of a tea at Coulton's.

But Mary forced a smile too. After all, Eileen was being very good. Eileen was taking care of Bruce. She

had a right to be charitable if she wished. "How nice of you, Eileen," Mary said.

Bruce barged through all this quibbling. The message had made him anxious, Mary could see. "What is it, Mother? Did you want me for anything special?"

Mary liked the way that in the face of anything between him and her he seemed to ignore Eileen. "Yes," she said. "I've got a job."

Eileen was delighted. "Have you, Mary? I'm so pleased. How lucky! Yes, please, waitress, tea for three and some plain cakes. What sort of job, dear?"

Mary was irritated into a little cruelty to Eileen. "Barmaid," she said shortly.

"Mary!" Eileen for once lacked words. "Mary! What do you mean?"

"I'm going to look after the small private bar at the 'Old Cow'."

Eileen recovered. "My dear," she said, with some return of her old complacence, "you can't do anything of the sort. You could never do so wrong, I'm sure."

Bruce said nothing. Mary watched his troubled face bent forward over his plate. She would wait for him to speak. Meanwhile—"Why not?" she said to Eileen.

"Because not," said Eileen quickly. "In this town and everything. What would people think?"

"But will they know?"

"Of course they'll know. A thing like that gets round. You couldn't do it."

"But I've taken the job now," said Mary.

"Well, I don't know what to say, I'm sure. Robert will be most upset. Bruce, dear, get the sugar from the next table, will you? The girl's forgotten it. I think you ought to have consulted us."

"But, Eileen, I have to do something."

"I know. But a barmaid! And what does Bruce think about it?" She turned to him as one might to a precocious child whose answer might be quaint.

"I don't know," said Bruce thickly into his tea-cup.

Mary looked at him sharply. So that was it. He

would not talk in front of Eileen. She wondered rather wistfully what had been going on in Burnley Road.

"Well, it's very upsetting. It's not as though it were in London. Everyone knows everyone else in these towns. And their business. It'll be the talk of the place. You always did do funny things, Mary. There's Mrs. Hinkson coming in. I must run across and speak to her."

Bruce looked up. "Are you really going to do it, Mother?"

"Yes, Bruce. If I can. I've no experience, you know."

"Then I'm going to start working."

Mary was startled now. If he got that into his head all her plans would go for nothing. "Now, Bruce," she said quickly. "Listen. We've come all this way for you to go to school. You must carry on, dear." She found it terribly hard to be persuasive. "You mustn't mind my working for a bit. You'll be much more likely to be able to keep me presently if you go to school now. Otherwise we might have years of struggle. When you've learnt enough, and are old enough, you shall earn the money!" She cast round in her mind desperately for more arguments, watching the troubled indecision on his face. "Besides," she said, "the work's not bad. It's supposed to be the best hotel here. I shall find it quite interesting. But I shall hate it if I'm not happy in my mind about you. Promise me now, you'll go on as you are for a while. . . ."

"But, Mother, I shall feel such a cad!"

"Promise me, Bruce. Quick, she's coming back. . . ."

Eyes down, shoulders stooped, he nodded.

Mary was smiling when Eileen reached the table. She had managed it, then. He would remain at school.

"So I told her we should be away . . ." Eileen's voice was running corpulently on.

CHAPTER VI

BRUCE

THEN Tom came home from boarding-school, a boisterous lout who called Paula "Sis" and was his mother's idol. Even Uncle Robert found little to grumble at in him. As for Bruce, he could find no common ground. He did not dislike Tom—he scarcely noticed him. And Tom considered him, as he told his mother, a "funny chap". His being at home made little difference except that Uncle Robert grew querulous about housekeeping expenses, and Aunt Pittery was unusually terse if he spoke in her presence.

Not long after his arrival there was considerable excitement at breakfast one morning because Arthur Groom was "to come round and spend the evening". He was a friend of Tom's, whom Bruce had met and found quite unbearable. He had a reputation for wit, and he unfortunately felt it incumbent upon him to live up to it. The family had a way of turning to him whenever he spoke, ready to burst into laughter if his remark could possibly be called funny, and usually it could. It was Tom who received the letter saying that he would come.

"Old Arthur can come this evening," he said. "So we shall have a good laugh." Tom had one in preparation, in which Aunt Eileen joined.

"He *is* an amusing boy," she said. "Paula, Arthur's coming round this evening," she continued, since Paula had just come in.

"Yes—isn't that fine!" said Tom. "Arthur's a scream ; don't you think so, Paula ?"

Paula, watching Bruce, said, "Yes."

"The most charitable thing to think about your friend," said Great-Aunt Pittery suddenly, "is that he is

insane." But no one answered her because they were used to such remarks from Great-Aunt Pittery.

"Good old Arthur," said Tom, with a mouthful of sausage. "Do you remember when he pretended to be a carol-singer? Laugh? I thought I should die."

Bruce silently wished that Arthur Groom's effort had produced that effect. "I've promised to go to the pictures with the Mouse this evening," he lied.

"Now, Bruce," said Aunt Eileen with characteristic indifference to anyone else's arrangements, "you can't go out when Arthur comes. It's not often we have anyone round, and you know he likes to see us all."

"Besides, Bruce," said Tom, "old Arthur's better than any rotten cinema. He's far funnier than Charlie Chaplin."

Bruce was going to apologize firmly when he caught Aunt Pittery's eye.

"Bruce," she said, "you will stand by me. I refuse to be left to face that disquieting piece of conceit and buffoonery alone this evening."

He could never refuse Great-Aunt Pittery, and capitulated. Only Paula tried to help him out. "But Bruce doesn't like Arthur," she said, "why should he stay in——?"

Uncle Robert interrupted. "What Bruce likes or dislikes has nothing to do with it. We have to put up with his friends. That self-opinionated little boy he calls 'the Mouse' is here often enough. And he has, I may say, a most abnormally large appetite for a boy of his size. We never complain of him. So Bruce ought to be civil enough to stay in for Tom's friends."

Bruce was exasperated into a retort. "Haven't I said I will, Uncle Robert? I can't do more than that."

Uncle Robert turned appealingly to his wife. "You see the way your nephew behaves?" he said. "Here am I clothing and keeping him, and sending him to an excellent school, and if I venture to point out his duty to us I am met with that insulting tone." He got up from the table. "This household is getting beyond me," he said. "I spend my whole life working to keep you,

and you, Bruce, can't speak civilly, while your great-aunt is deliberately insulting. It's not fair on me."

"Robert," said Great-Aunt Pittery, "don't make yourself look foolish. And don't for heaven's sake keep reminding your nephew that, through no fault of his own, he is inadequately fed and clothed out of your very sufficient income. Paula, pass me the margarine if you please."

There was no conceivable answer to that, and after a few moments Tom filled the breach. "Well, anyhow, everyone, six o'clock old Arthur blows in, and be ready for a right-down good laugh."

When Bruce reached home that evening he found the family more than usually bustling. Arthur Groom was apparently bringing his sister and a friend with him. Bruce went up to his room and changed.

As he came out on to the landing there was a stir downstairs, and "they had come". He could hear Arthur Groom's voice. "Hullo, Tom, old chap, how's your liver?" and the first shrieks of laughter. For a moment he almost decided to return to his room, lock the door, and let the whole thing go to hell. He felt he could not get through the evening. But he supposed that somehow he would have to, and came slowly downstairs.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo! Here's our Argentine! How are the *gauchos*, Bruce? How are the cut-throats?" This from Arthur Groom from the midst of the group; then, with an assumption of secrecy, "How are the naughty *señoritas*?" Peals of laughter.

He was a fairly intelligent-looking fellow, with mouse-coloured hair, greased to curl back from the forehead, and horn-rimmed spectacles. He had the ready assurance of the accepted humorist and the potential jealousy of one used to occupying the centre of a group. His sister and "her friend" were with him, round-faced girls who seemed to think Arthur too splendid for words; at any rate they scarcely wasted any. It would have been almost sacrilegious to do more than put in encouraging remarks when he was "in form", which he evidently was tonight.

Bruce shook hands with them all, and Aunt Eileen asked them to come into the dining-room, not specifying the meal they were to enjoy. It would have been hard to do so. There was tea, a variety of meat sandwiches, a small cold chicken, jellies, and cakes.

But before they could get into the room Arthur Groom was in the doorway, a snatched-up school cap on his head, imitating a guard on the Underground. "Hurry along, please! Hurry along there. Passing Hyde Park Corner. Mind the gates!"

The effect of this was slightly spoiled by Great-Aunt Pittery, who walked straight through, ignoring his "Where for, lady?" and took her place at the table. In that moment Bruce loved her.

They trooped in and Aunt Eileen arranged them. "Arthur, you come here," she said, "next to me. May, over there with Tom, and your friend beside Mr. Craig. Paula here, and Bruce over there. That's right. Now just help yourselves."

Bruce found himself separated both from Great-Aunt Pittery and from Paula. He offered a ham sandwich to Arthur's sister, who promptly took one from Tom on her other side.

"I say," said Arthur, "I should like to have met the pig that made this ham, Mrs. Craig. He must have been a prize porker! Were you acquainted with him, Tom?"

"Not exactly, old chap," said Tom. Arthur Groom seemed to make them all feel that smart replies were expected of them, and this of Tom's hardly seemed adequate. But Tom could evidently think of nothing else. "Er . . . not exactly," he added.

"You never know who old Tom mixes with—do you, Tom? Sly old devil! Who were you in the pictures with last week, Tom?"

Tom, amid laughter, said he had been alone with him, Arthur.

"Oh yes. Oh yes. But who was the girl?"

Tom said there was no girl.

"Oh yes, there was, Thomas. Don't attempt to deny

it. We all know there was a girl there last week. Mrs. Craig, would you believe it ? Your son was in the pictures last week with a girl, and he was so taken with her he never took his eyes off her from the time he went in to the time he came out !"

Aunt Eileen pantomimically said, "There !"

"Oh, but it's true, I assure you. I observed him carefully."

His sister's friend, to help the joke out in the approved way, said, "Who was she, anyhow ?"

"Greta Garbo !" said Arthur Groom, at which there were hurricanes of mirth.

"Oh, Arthur !" said Aunt Eileen, while Tom, with streaming eyes, said, "That's a good one !"

There was a silence gathering as the laughter dwindled into last spirts and finally died down. Arthur Groom was trying to think of something to say—nobody else liked to attempt anything after a sally so brilliant.

Great-Aunt Pittery broke the silence with her usual abrupt precision. "Robert," she observed, "I think I need a whisky-and-soda."

Whisky was kept in the house "in case of illness", and Robert grudged the use of it even then. But he was armourless against Great-Aunt Pittery when there were guests present. She was capable of saying anything. So he silently handed the keys to Paula, who went to his decanter case.

"You know, Mrs. Pittery, I somehow don't think you like me very much," said Arthur Groom.

"I don't," returned the old lady, and tightened her lips.

There was an uncomfortable silence, broken by Aunt Eileen offering tea.

When at last the meal was over, and the family sat over the crumbed plates and half-empty dishes, and Great-Aunt Pittery sipped her whisky, and Uncle Robert, as a tribute to the occasion, lit a cigar, and Tom handed round a large metal cigarette-case, and Paula smiled appealingly to Bruce, as though to show she was on his side, Aunt Eileen rose from the table.

"Don't get up for a minute," she said. "I've a little surprise for you," and she crossed to the cupboard.

"Ah, the family skeleton," said Arthur Groom.

Aunt Eileen brought back a box of crackers and handed them round the table. There were just about enough to go round, and a chain was formed.

"High explosives. Keep away," said Arthur Groom.

When they were pulled it was discovered that they contained paper hats. "Let old Arthur deal them out," suggested Tom. "Arthur, you take them and give them out however you think. That'll be a rag."

So Arthur Groom took them and walked round the back of the table pushing one on to each head, to the general delight—a bonnet with strings to Uncle Robert, a Britannia-like helmet to Aunt Eileen, a pirate's hat with skull and cross-bones to Tom, and so on. He enjoyed himself immensely until he tried to push a pierrot's cap on to Aunt Pittery's little head.

"Don't be idiotic," the old lady said. "Bruce, take that ridiculous piece of paper off. I can't have the only face I can bear to look at for two moments made to look silly."

Bruce obeyed, glad of an excuse. He felt that Uncle Robert was on the verge of a complaint, but Aunt Eileen suggested adjournment to the drawing-room.

The evening wore on. Bruce managed to find a place in the corner of the room next to Great-Aunt Pittery, and kept out of the round games successfully. Once, when they wanted another player, they called him, but Paula rescued him by saying: "Oh, leave Bruce out. He's no good at games", for which he was grateful.

"Why do I detest this so much?" he said quietly to Great-Aunt Pittery, while Arthur Groom was on his hands and knees with the hearth-rug over him playing charades.

"Why not?" said the old lady. "Why they can endure it is far more inexplicable. But humanity is. Scenes like this always make me reflect what a splendid place the world would be if there were no people in it."

"Oh, I say!" smiled Bruce, "that's rather unkind."

"Do you think you'd feel particularly charitable if at my age you had to sit in a room like this"—she gazed at a photo in a sea-shell frame—"and watch an abortion like that ?" She kicked her small toe towards Arthur Groom, who was barking like a dog under the hearth-rug.

"But I'm younger. I feel I ought not to hate it all."

"Rubbish, Bruce. You're young and selfish and ambitious and you ought to be out in the fields. For goodness' sake don't blame yourself because your idea of pleasure isn't a bedlam like this. You ought to go down on your knees every night and thank God for it."

"Then you don't blame me for being unhappy here ?"

"On the contrary, I respect you for it."

"But why ? It's the only home I've got. They were decent to take me in at all. And it's their life. I ought to be able to adapt myself to it."

"Heaven forbid !"

"And really they're soft-hearted, you know."

"What's the use of that when they're hard-headed ? Can you honestly pretend that what you call her soft-heartedness makes you fond of your Aunt Eileen ?"

"I suppose not. But she's decent in her way. I've got quite used to her."

"Yes. One does get used to people. That's what I told my first husband when he was dying. 'The house will seem quite strange without you,' I said. But he did not seem to appreciate it at all—in fact he was inclined to be resentful. Thank God, they're beginning to move."

It was true, they were rising to go. Phrases reached Bruce out of the confusion of overcoats and hand-shaking. "It's been lovely." "Come again soon." "Never laughed so much in my life." There was a last inaudible joke on the doorstep, and the front door closed. Uncle Robert, Aunt Eileen, Tom, and Paula came back into the drawing-room whence Aunt Pittery had already departed for bed. Bruce saw that they still had excitement in their faces and knew that inevitably the evening would be gone over again, the jokes repeated, criticisms made, and a grouse

or two come from Uncle Robert. So he quietly excused himself and went up to his own room.

Alone at last he threw himself fully dressed on the bed. It was damnable! He could not stand much more of it. Arthur Groom's condescension, the family's manner towards him of long-suffering endurance—why should he be expected to face all this? Perhaps, as Great-Aunt Pittery said, he was selfish; anyhow he could not carry gratitude as far as putting up with evenings like the one just finished.

If only, he thought, he had something big to fight against, some really great issue to decide, he could bear it. If there came to him, as there invariably came to heroes of films and plays and novels, tremendous moments in which all life hung on a decision between courage and cowardice, if he could only be matched against fighting odds, he would enjoy the struggle. But this eternal irritation with petty things, this unforgettable martyrdom to people like Arthur Groom, made life unendurable.

And over it all continually hung the shadow of the circumstances in which he was and from which he could scarcely hope to escape. Over it all was the fact that he was dependent for food and clothing on people who resented the fact.

He lay still on the metal bed, his face rubbed by the sleeve of his jacket. Vaguely through the open window came the sound of the traffic in the busier street a hundred yards away. Bruce could almost have sobbed. It was so futile. Why should he be made miserable by anyone so ultimately insignificant to his life as Arthur Groom? Met on equal ground he would not matter; if he produced his privileged humour anywhere else Bruce would have the pleasant chance of smashing his face. But because he was here, in this damned silly little house among these people, he had to take the fellow's remarks lying down. . . . Not, as he reflected, that the poor fool meant any harm. He was just being himself. But Bruce would have laughed with joy to meet him unfettered and be able to fight for a sweet ten minutes.

Well—it was no good whining really. He must remember that after all there were better places in the world to which he and his mother must somehow attain—green mountains and long white roads winding down into the sunset. There were rivers to bathe in and seas to sail, there were moors to go striding across with the wind in one's face. Cities too ; the jewelly streets of London, restaurants with shaded lights, and great expectant theatres. There were splendid people somewhere, with open hearts and fearless imaginations. Only to know them he must escape, he must break away from this atmosphere. And he would. Somehow he would. . . .

CHAPTER VII

MARY

But Mary had her Arthur Grooms as well, as she told Bruce when he bitterly confided in her the story of that evening. Hers were older, she explained, but much the same. They began to come into her bar at about eleven o'clock on her first morning there, greeting each other heartily with jokes about their condition on the evening before, and they clustered about her little semi-circular counter till closing-time.

At first she was nervous. The retiring barmaid, a monosyllabic young woman, showed her how to draw beer and measure out a gin-and-Italian, gave her a card of the prices, and left her to face the customers. For a long time Mary waited in her corner, looking calm and fresh enough in her dark-blue dress and white collar, but inwardly apprehensive. She studied the room—not a large one, brown walls, leather armchairs, a coal fire, ugly modern sporting-prints ; she peered through into the billiard-room beyond, with its deserted table covered by a dust-sheet like a giant coffin ; she stirred the fire, polished her wedding-ring in absent nervousness, arranged her glossy dark hair before the glass, and wished she had a book.

Then the first customer came in, a full-blooded, sandy-haired man of fifty. "Hullo, where's Winnie ?"

Winnie was presumably the departed barmaid. Mary smiled. "She's gone, I'm afraid."

"Oh, never mind. So you've come instead ?"

The question was either too rhetorical or too fatuous to answer, so Mary smiled again.

"Well, give me a nice Scotch and splash, will you ?" he beamed.

Mary poured out the whisky and handed him the siphon. He paid—and drank.

"So Winnie's gone," he observed, sucking his moustache.

"Yes," said Mary.

He lit a cigarette. "You new to Greycaster ?"

"Yes," said Mary.

"How do you like it ?"

There was only one answer to a question like that, and Mary gave it. "Oh, not so bad," she said.

"That's right," said the man. "There are worse places."

Conversation lapsed again.

He was on the point of putting more questions to her a minute later when the swing door let in another customer. A shorter, stouter one this time. The first man turned to him at once, as though the greeting of his friend was important enough to supersede immediately his conversation with Mary. "Hullo," he said. "What's it going to be ?"

" 'Morning, Jack," returned the arrival, rubbing his hands expectantly. "I'll have a little drop of bitter. New young lady, I see."

"Yes. Winnie's gone."

"Oh, Winnie's gone, has she ?"

"So this young lady was telling me."

"Well, I never knew Winnie was going."

Mary drew his beer.

"Thank you," smiled the new customer.

"Saw old Parkins last night," said the first. "He wanted to see you."

"Wanted to see me, did he ? What about ?"

"Oh, about this concert he's getting up. He wants your missus to sing."

"Missus is in bed at present."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What's the matter ?"

"Oh, just a cold, I think," said the stouter customer absently, as though, even to oblige his friend, he did not want to think about it.

"Everybody seems to have got them."

"You ready for another drink ?"

"Just the 'other half', old man."

"Same again, please, Miss."

Mary, feeling that the game had started, gave them "same again". The door let in two more, who nodded to the first, but did not join them. They took their beers across the room and sat down. They were talking deeply about something—Mary wondered what could absorb them so much. Politics, she imagined. One was being emphatic and she could catch his words. "So I told him. 'It's a damn' shame,' I said. They ought never to have left him out of the team. He's the best man they've got." Mary turned to yet another customer.

The bar was soon full. They all asked where Winnie was, and said, "Oh, she's gone ?" They all eyed her appraisingly. They all talked round her, but, beyond a grin or two as they ordered or paid for drinks, did not as yet address many remarks to her. So much the better. Give her time to sort them out a bit. Good-natured lot they seemed, honest, heavy, cheerful men. This would be bearable. While they were *en masse* like this, going into farther corners of the room to tell smutty jokes, and in general a little shy of her, it would be bearable. But how she could see Geoffrey amongst it !

As days went by she began to know them. Most of them, it seemed, were "regulars"—neighbouring shopkeepers and local clerks, Greycastrians who made this particular bar their rendezvous. There was the tobacconist, a sharp-featured man who called her Miss and invited her to have a spot with him ; the stertorous keeper of a temperance hotel who did not ; a couple of young insurance agents, one of whom was over-dressed and unpopular because he occasionally left the accepted channels of conversation to describe his dreams, which were prolific ; the other with the reputation of a "sheik" and a soft voice that came straying out of his pleasant, rather baby face. There was a ginger-pated hairdresser who threw his arm round everyone and called them

"dear boy", and the cheerful manager of a local factory. There was an asthmatic ass who had been left shares in the same concern, and a number of minor employees of it who followed their leader. There was a couple of young brothers who kept a book-shop, the elder freckled, large-headed, long-nosed, the younger sallow and inquisitive, both excitingly dressed, and greatly disliked by the "regulars". There was a perspiring official from the town hall opposite, and the manager of an ice-cream concern who had been in China and could not forget it. There was a corn-haired car salesman who was always growing moustaches and shaving them off again, and a naval officer who could not grow one at all. And so on.

Day after day they came in one after another, always with the same greeting, "What 'u g' 'ave ?", always with a stock of news on the prescribed subjects. She soon learnt what these were. Sport first : the progress of the local football team, Hillingly United, which was a never-failing butt for the most heart-rending jokes. Politics next : abuse of these "Labour swine", with an occasional outburst of such wild socialism as a good word for Mr. Macdonald. Then the state of trade, which seemed discouraging. After that the missus, and jokes about somebody being seen coming home with somebody else, or the attractiveness of a local maiden. And twining in and out of these for ever, as new "regulars" arrived, the weather. For ever and ever the weather.

But sometimes the conversation took more daring turns. Wider outlooks became evident, interest spread to such far and cosmopolitan heights as new buildings, the launch of an airship, the King's health, the latest murder. These unconventional subjects, however, must not be broached too suddenly. It was the worst form to burst into the room with a remark about something so out-of-the-way as the train-service. Such must be reached through an avenue starting with the inefficiency of the government, and so gently to the inefficiency of the railway. But, she noticed, once such an absorbing topic had

been reached it was masticated thoroughly. Useless to try impatiently for a change. Everyone must add their quota—abuse of the existing conditions, an anecdote illustrating its shortcomings, or even a defence of it. But it was not "done" to go on to something fresh, or back to the weather, before it was completely thrashed out.

Then, Mary noticed, there was the ritual of drinks. If one of four men stood a round, each of the others must follow. And each must wait to drink his four. Non-observance of this cardinal rule was fatal. For instance, a collector for local charities was notorious for forgetting to stand his share, and consequently anathema among the "regulars". But on the other hand it was no less blameworthy to stand a drink and refuse what was enigmatically known as "the other half".

Everyone was openly discussed. In her first fortnight in the bar Mary heard each member of the circle solemnly abuse every other. It started with the book-selling brothers. As soon as they had sloped out someone would say, "Conceited young swine", and the tale would be taken up with unexpected venom. But it was not limited to these two, who were out of the usual crowd. Two "regulars" might have been drinking together with the utmost cordiality, and on one leaving the other would exhale sherry'd abuse into a third's ear. Mary listened.

On the whole they were good to her. The barber called her "My dear" and said smiling things about her eyes, the tobacconist raised his hat when he said good morning, the psychic insurance agent said he had had a vision of her being burned as a white witch in Tudor times, and the soft-voiced one tried harmlessly and quite amiably to squeeze her hand. A young solicitor, whom she liked, used to give her cigarettes, and the mottled manager was the first to call her "Mary". The asthmatic one asked her to come out in his car "any evening", and the two brothers confided in her their distaste for Greycaster, which she reciprocated. The ice-cream merchant told her about China. They meant kindly enough.

Mary found it all rather tiring, but amusing to watch.

She was not cynical, but could be no more than observant. And the work was clean enough.

Her afternoons were free, and she would walk up the river to watch Bruce playing rugger, or take him for a walk out of the town. (She never let him come to Fowl Row.) And he would take her arm and talk violently, his mouth a little loose when he was excited, and his laughter making passers-by watch them go on. She loved him when he confided in her—anything, about the Mouse or Peter, or his school, or his aunt. She loved to feel as young as he, as though she were another, a particular, school-friend.

CHAPTER VIII

BRUCE

It was not until the autumn that the unfortunate affair of Bruce's animosity to Arthur Groom came to a head. Aunt Eileen had planned a picnic. By an arrangement, subtly understood without direct reference to comparative expense, Arthur Groom was to supply a car, his uncle's, and Aunt Eileen was to provide food. They were to motor down to the Sussex coast, have lunch on the downs, and come back in the evening. Somehow the six of them were to be got into the Morris-Oxford, a feat made just possible by Bruce and Tom taking turns to sit on the floor before the feet of Aunt Eileen, Uncle Robert, and Paula at the back.

At first he had decided not to go, but when he had told his mother she insisted that he should not miss a day's sea air. The family was not altogether pleased at his decision.

"When Arthur's coming here," grumbled Uncle Robert, "you always want to go out. But you don't refuse an outing like this, I notice."

"I won't come if you don't want me to," said Bruce impatiently.

"Now, Bruce!" warned Aunt Eileen.

"Of course you must come," said Paula, and even Tom admitted that "we ought to have a cheery old crowd".

Immediately after breakfast—it was Bank Holiday—the dining-room table was cleared for "cutting sandwiches", and Aunt Eileen grew quite spry as she managed them all capably.

"Now, Paula, you butter those while Bruce peels the

tomatoes. Tom, what are you doing with the salad ? It's not to be cut up yet !"

"Oh yes, let's make it here. Much better to make it before we set out."

"Now, Tom dear, let your mother have her own way. Tomatoes ready, Bruce ? You are a quick hand. Where's the pepper, Paula ?"

"Can't find any."

"Now ! Don't say there's no pepper. Agnes, where's the pepper ?"

"It was finished, Mum."

"There ! I knew there'd be something ! Tom, ask your father to slip down to Rogers' Stores, they'll be open till ten, and get some pepper. We can't have cucumber sandwiches without any."

They cut and spread, everyone's mind busy with the day's chances.

"It's going to be a scorcher !" said Tom, looking out of the window.

"You'll be a scorcher if you don't hurry up with that lettuce," joked Aunt Eileen. "And, Agnes, you'll look after Mrs. Pittery, won't you ? And you can go when you've washed up the lunch things. What time's Arthur coming, Tom ?"

"May be round any minute with the old bus."

"Well, hurry up. Now, Bruce, you do the jam ones, there's a good chap."

Uncle Robert returned. "Here you are," he said. "Fivepence, Eileen. Don't spread the butter so thick, Bruce, we don't want to be ill."

There was the vociferous blowing of a motor-horn outside, and in a minute Arthur Groom, who had now passed that difficult and important stage of intimacy during which it was necessary to ring the front-door bell, was among them.

"All ahoy !" he said. "How's it going, Mrs. Craig ? Doing a little special one for yours sincerely ?"

"We're nearly ready, old sport," said Tom.

"That's good. The fiery steeds are panting at the door."

"You slip up and get your hat on, Paula ; I'll finish here. Arthur, just hand me that fish-basket that's hanging on the back of the door."

Arthur Groom leapt to attention, took a sharp turn to the right, three paces forward, then raised his hand for the bag as though mechanically handling a rifle.

"Now, Arthur," giggled Aunt Eileen, "don't start making us laugh or we shall *never* be ready."

"Oh, Mrs. Craig"—Arthur mimicked extreme shock —"you know I would not do such a thing !"

At last they were ready, and trooped through the narrow hall to the front door. "In with the skipper first," said Arthur, holding the car door open and motioning Uncle Robert forward. "Now the fair Paula."

Aunt Eileen was just coming down the path from the house, and as she approached the car Arthur Groom whipped out his handkerchief and spread it on the kerb. "Sir Walter Raleigh !" he smirked.

They were nearly out of the suburbs before Aunt Eileen leaned forward to say : "All right down there, Bruce ?"

"Yes, thanks."

Arthur Groom's ambitions in driving seemed to be to pass as many other cars as possible, an effort in which he was encouraged by Tom, who kept count of the vehicles they left behind. "Not so bad for a 1925 bus ?" he called back.

"It seems to go very well," said Uncle Robert. "Use much petrol ?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," returned Arthur enigmatically over his shoulder as they jangled on.

"Lovely scenery," commented Aunt Eileen presently.

"Yes," said Uncle Robert. "We go through some very pretty parts this way."

"There's a nice old place"—Aunt Eileen pointed. "I wonder who lives there."

Arthur Groom was talking again. "We shall soon be down to the sea again, the rolling sea and the tide," he chanted. Then : "A life on the ocean wave . . ." he

began, but Tom, laughing, told him to shut up and mind his driving.

"You two boys will be the death of us," said Aunt Eileen.

At last they reached the downs, and eventually brought the car to rest at a point about a mile inland from Eastbourne. Aunt Eileen began to lay out the things, while Arthur ran Uncle Robert and Tom down to an inn to get some beer. Bruce lay on his stomach and looked out to sea. They were too used to his silence to think that there was anything wrong. He could smell cowslips and feel the short, sweet grass, hear sheep a mile away, and larks a hundred yards above. He could see ships away on the horizon, and feel the warmth of the sun on his back, and he could exult in the prospect of an hour in these surroundings alone, presently. Really it was worth it—even Arthur Groom was worth it. And he began inconsequently to dream of a morning like this when he and his mother would set off for a walk over the turf together, from their home close by. They could talk without restraint and be together indefinitely. . . .

"Shsh," he heard beside him. "Don't disturb him. He's thinking of his *señorita* again!" A burst of laughter told him that Arthur Groom was back.

Lunch began. Everyone was too hungry to talk for a while, except to ask for the various species of sandwich. Uncle Robert had removed his collar and tie as a tribute to the *abandon* of the whole affair, revealing a marked distinction between the red of his neck and face and the unhealthy whiteness of his skin. His scraggy grey moustache played about the white bread of the sandwiches or dipped into his beer. Aunt Eileen drank Guinness and sat crosswise on a mackintosh. The shoes she had put on that morning were too tight, and she had asked general permission to kick them off. Tom and Arthur Groom were in shirt-sleeves, eating heartily.

Bruce's eyes wandered round the circle—he could never prevent himself from watching people. Often he had given offence by his habit of looking about him with a

fixed, unconscious, intelligent stare. But today it was not long before his look found its home with Paula, and he lay watching the contrast of her hair with the green downs.

"I say," came from Aunt Eileen presently. "Nobody's had a cucumber one! They've been in the packet all the time. Here, Arthur, do have a cucumber!"

"Thanks awfully, Mrs. Craig. As a matter of fact I was wondering where they'd got to, only I didn't like to say anything."

"You silly boy! As if you didn't know us well enough by this time!"

"Oh, Mrs. Craig!"—Arthur mimicked an absurd giggle—"you embarrass me!"

"Not many people about," said Aunt Eileen, a few minutes later.

"No, I think we've chosen a good spot," said Uncle Robert.

"It's certainly a popular one with the wasps," remarked Arthur Groom, flapping a newspaper.

But Bruce still felt well disposed to them all. He was not unhappy among them—at least cheerful enough to be almost glad that the disconcerting Great-Aunt Pittery was not there to make him feel ashamed of them again. When Arthur Groom, seeing him have a glass of beer, chimed in with "Oh, Bruce, you are a one!" he actually replied, though not maliciously, "I drank beer when I was six years old in South America."

"I've always heard it's a hot place, but, good lord, that's going it! Six years old! What do you say, Tom?"

"Pretty thick!" said Tom.

"Sure they didn't give you beer in your bottle, Bruce?"

"Quite likely."

"And I suppose you started to smoke when you were four?"

"Mother says I was born with a cigarette in my mouth."

"Not very good taste on your mother's part," said

Aunt Eileen. "Now who's going to help me clear up?"

Everyone set about putting the things together, and repacking the remains of the sandwiches.

"We may want them later," said Aunt Eileen providently.

"Look here," said Arthur Groom, with a huge wink to Uncle Robert and Tom, "these bottles ought to go back before they close!"

"Of course they ought," said Uncle Robert, consulting his watch with brisk anxiety, "there's twopence each on those."

So the three of them got in the car. "We won't be long," said Arthur Groom. "Then we'll play rounders, eh, Mrs. Craig?"

Bruce's moment had come. Aunt Eileen had made herself comfortable with cushions.

"I'm going for a stroll," he said.

"All right. Don't be long, dear, we're all going to play games presently."

But to his surprise and slightly to his annoyance Paula said: "May I come with you?" She looked up rather plaintively, her face pale and eager above her gym dress.

"If you like," said Bruce shortly.

In a silent moment of walking they were alone.

"You answered Arthur Groom!" exclaimed Paula. "I thought you always reserved a dignified silence with him?"

"You *do* think me a snob, don't you? I don't mean to be dignified, and I'm sure I'm not. It's just that the best answer to that fellow is indifference. At first I felt self-conscious about it, because I wasn't really indifferent at all. I must have looked rather an ass when he spoke to me. But now I'm so used to it that it really is genuine indifference."

"I believe it is. And today?"

They stopped a moment. It was high noon, and from where they stood they could see Eastbourne, a cluster of

red roofs and spires, and beyond it the sea. Heat hung over the town like vapour and made the sea a shimmering stretch of blue molten silver, with an unreal luminous sky above it. The downs, too, were crazy with heat, giving off a haze and a warm scent of hill-side violets, sweet grass, cowslips, and thyme. Over the green expanse to Beachy Head people were scattered like tall flowers, in couples mostly, and to the west was a flock of sheep whose bleating reached them faintly. They stood while the hot breeze played on their hair, impotent to lift it; they looked silently about them.

Then some devil entered Bruce, and he began to walk. Over the springy turf, heedless of Paula's shorter steps (or if mindful of them reflecting rather vindictively that she "*would* come"), to the tune of the larks he strode, breathing deep gulps of air, but not talking.

Away from the others, on and away for a mile at least, then a pause. He was warm but not breathless, though Paula was panting bravely.

"That was lovely!" she said.

Again she seemed to trap his attention. He looked down at her, a little excited schoolgirl in a gym dress, gazing at him. She wore thick woolly stockings. And she was still inclined to cry. He would rather have been by himself.

He made to go on. Paula pleaded. "Oh, Bruce—don't go any farther!"

"Why not?"

"The others . . ."

"Let them wait. What does it matter?"

She touched his arm. "*Please*, Bruce."

"Oh, all right." He turned to go back. But doing so he saw her face—childish, grateful. He stooped suddenly and kissed her, laughing, on the forehead.

"Bruce!" she cried, bewildered.

"Come along."

They came back, but they had been away over an hour. "The others" were evidently angry. At first, when they came down the slope to the group sitting beside the

car, no one spoke, an extremely disconcerting sign. They fell to the grass in silence. Suddenly Aunt Eileen broke out : "Perhaps you two don't realize how inconsiderately you have behaved ?"

"Pretty rotten, I call it, Bruce," Tom added. "You take Paula away for the whole afternoon when you knew we wanted to play rounders."

"Oh, let him alone," said Arthur Groom, with a sort of superior disgust in his voice.

"It's the last time I shall allow petrol to be wasted on bringing you out, Bruce," said Uncle Robert.

Bruce, as usual, said nothing. He did not even mind very much, except for Paula's sake. He had grown so accustomed to throwing up a perfectly effective shield against all this sort of thing that it left him untouched. Only Groom's attitude goaded him somewhat.

The project of rounders was mercifully abandoned for the time being ; it was scarcely consistent, perhaps, with the mass-disgust just expressed. So presently Aunt Eileen produced a thermos flask, and they drank tea and ate dyspeptic cake which had been made the afternoon before. Bruce sat a little apart, thinking then, strangely enough, more of the family outbreak than of his walk. Of course he could see their point of view. In a way they were right. It was unpleasant for them to have him foisted on to them as a member of the family, with no sense of his obligations as such. All he ever expected to do in gratitude to Uncle Robert was to repay him in cash one day for the expense he had been, and although he was justified in believing that such an adjustment would be the only one welcome to Uncle Robert, the idea was not conducive to good-fellowship in the family circle. Towards Aunt Eileen he felt differently. He realized her restricted and determined goodness in keeping him all this time. After all, she darned his socks and looked after him, was not above caring about him a little, and must have had many bitter struggles with her husband over him. He felt some degree of shame for his thoughts when they included Aunt Eileen. He could not change

them ; he could not like her. But she was good to him. Tom was almost non-existent, so far as Bruce felt.

It was the other fellow, Groom, who had become intolerable. For months he had endured his presence and his gibes ; this afternoon he was at the end of his tether. He looked covertly at Groom, his greasy waved hair, his horn-rimmed glasses, his slightly mottled skin, sitting cross-legged by the tea plates, smoking a pipe and being funny. And Bruce felt something in him become taut as though he had sat on a spring, which if released would send him fist foremost into Groom's face. He tried to call himself petty, prejudiced, jealous, but no adjective that he could rally to the aid of his self-control was of much use. He knew that if Groom directed one remark at him, however lightly it was said, he would go across and hit that detestably smug face.

There was something in the air, perhaps in the place, that had stirred him. He hated Arthur Groom. Yes, as he watched him across the cloth spread for tea, he hated, despised, loathed, detested that creature ; he thought him ugly, evil-minded, and foul ; he wanted to strike with all his force into the pulpy unpleasantness of his face. And if Groom addressed him he would. In due course, naturally, Groom did address him.

It was after tea. Rounders were again in the air. Paula was reconciled and Bruce taken for granted.

"We'll have sides," said Arthur Groom. "Mr. and Mrs. Craig pick up !"

Aunt Eileen tittered gently. "I shouldn't know how to," she said.

"Oh, it's quite easy," said Arthur. "You just point to me and say, 'I'll have that good-looking boy there, because I'm sure he's the best player on the field !' "

As laughter subsided somebody noticed Bruce strolling away. "Come along, Bruce," said Aunt Eileen smoothly. "We want you for rounders."

Bruce hesitated. He knew he ought to stay. By going he would leave them with uneven numbers. But how could he join in that fatuous game ? He wanted

to walk over the downs alone, and think. He would give anything to be alone for half an hour, now that the skyline was stuck with silhouettes. After all, he was seventeen now. Surely if he did not want to play rounders . . . oh, how damn' silly it made him feel. He paused.

Then Groom, inevitably, spoke. "Come on, Bruce," he said. "No creeping off this time. No hiding in the woods now, old son."

Bruce lost all control. He crossed to Groom and stood close to him. "Shut your silly mouth!" he said. "Or I'll put my fist through it."

Groom stepped back a pace. "Well, I'm hanged," he said. "Pleasant little customer, aren't you?" All his funniness was gone—his raw nature showed. "Nice-mannered little gentleman!"

Behind him Bruce half heard Aunt Eileen's astounded: "Bruce, behave yourself!" and from Paula a queer little cry of "Bruce!" But he could not have stopped then. "Did you hear me tell you to shut your mouth? Shut it, or, by God, I'll mess you up."

Groom had not got his measure. This, he thought, was sheer bluff. "Do it!" he said. "Do it, you dirty dago! I'll not be ordered about by you!"

And Bruce did it. With a brutal, prepared, straight left he let go clean into Groom's face. In the blow was the repressed dislike of many months, and it sounded ugly in the quiet of the moment. At once in the group behind a startled hubbub arose.

For a few seconds Bruce was only aware of Groom having gone unexpectedly to earth, but gradually the disturbance behind him took form. "What has he done? . . ." cried Aunt Eileen, all her complacence gone. "You wicked boy, Bruce! Get some water, Tom! Oh, how could you?"

Uncle Robert had lost his temper and come up inflamed with beer and sunlight and anger, a flustered cock of a man with ruffled hair. "You coward!" he shouted at Bruce. "What you want is a horse-whipping!"

"It's what he's going to get!" This from Arthur Groom, struggling to his feet. "Let me get at him!"

"No, no, Arthur, no fighting, please!" begged Aunt Eileen.

"Let old Arthur go for him, Mater," said Tom. "He'll make mincemeat of him!"

This prospect seemed somewhat to alter the prospect. "But you shouldn't fight!" said Aunt Eileen.

How silly they all looked, thought Bruce. How flurried and absurd. There was Aunt Eileen, wisps of hair emerging playfully from under her hat, and Uncle Robert explosive with anger. Well, he was not sorry. He had longed for this for so long. How many times had he wanted to plant his fist in Groom's face? He had done it now, and he was exultant.

"I should allow Arthur to give your nephew a thorough good hiding," said Uncle Robert. "He certainly deserves it for that piece of cowardice!"

"Let 'em scrap it out," echoed Tom. "Old Arthur'll knock spots off Bruce!"

"No, we can't have fighting," said Aunt Eileen. "It would never do."

"Let me go for him, Mrs. Craig," said Arthur Groom, a little hysterical now. "Let me go for him! It was a rotten thing to do—hit me when I wasn't expecting it. I'll lay him out!"

There was a silence which Arthur Groom could have construed as one of assent; but nothing happened.

"Arthur, dear," said Aunt Eileen, "I'm sorry that it has happened. But you should just treat it with the contempt it deserves. For my sake don't fight!"

Suddenly Paula spoke. "I think Arthur had better leave it alone for his own sake," she said. It was the most unexpected remark in the whole affair.

"Paula!" exclaimed Aunt Eileen, almost dumbfounded.

"I suppose you're siding with Bruce," sneered Tom; "you like people who do sneaking things like that."

Paula realized that she had said more than she thought her words would convey. But she stood her ground. "I'm not siding with anyone," she said. "I'm only telling Arthur that it might be best for him not to have a fight."

It was a feeble little protest, but to Bruce it seemed brave. He smiled across to Paula, proud of her courage. It had cost her much to say that, and he knew it. It was braver than any opposition he would ever make.

But by then Uncle Robert had had time to collect himself from his amazement at Paula's remark and turned to her officiously: "Paula, I'm ashamed of you! And after Arthur has brought us down here today! I'm ashamed of my own daughter. Go straight over to the car and wait till we come. As for you, Bruce, you deserve a good thrashing. It's what I ought to have given you long ago. Young barbarian! You come and live on me and allow me to do everything I can for you, and then repay me with a piece of cowardice like this. It's . . . it's unspeakable! Now, sir, you will apologize to Arthur Groom!"

But Aunt Eileen had more wisdom. Instinctively she knew that an apology would never be wrung from Bruce, and she had the sense to prevent this being made a point of issue. "I don't see that an apology would be much good after that," she said. "It's too disgraceful!"

"I don't want his apology," said Arthur Groom viciously, piecing together his broken glasses. "If you weren't present, Mrs. Craig, I'd give him a hiding. As it is, I shall have to wait."

"I shall speak to you this evening," said Uncle Robert to Bruce. "You've quite ruined the day for us all!"

That ended it for the moment, and they straggled back towards the car. But that evening, after a sour and miserable drive home, there was a sort of conference. Bruce by then felt a curious schoolboy shame of what he had done. He realized fully that there had been nothing manly about hitting Arthur Groom. It had been

a mad red impulse that had risen in him, torn him as it freed itself, and sent his arm into that pasty, humorous face. As they had left the downs there had been a sunset, and everyone had tried to show by quiet, painful sentences and hurt looks how utterly the day had been spoilt for them. The roads back to Smetham were crowded with hot, flower-bearing holiday-makers in char-à-bancs, calling to passing cars, waving streamers, openly drinking out of bottles. The joy of a holiday seemed to have left the patient earth, she was like a painted, bedraggled woman permitting the last excesses. Bruce found this mood of closing flowers and fading skies to the accompaniment of rowdiness, one that broke down all his defences. He was nearly repentant.

But that night came the inevitable conference. Tom and Arthur Groom had gone out; Paula was in bed. Bruce sat wretchedly in a chair pretending to read, knowing that it would be useless for him to try to escape.

"Now, young man," began Uncle Robert importantly, "I want a few words with you."

"Yes."

"I don't think you quite realize how despicable was your conduct today. . . ."

Bruce sat quite still, waiting unemotionally. Uncle Robert seemed to be in difficulties. He obviously had nothing whatever to say. "It was . . . cowardly. Cowardly. Arthur Groom will have to get a new pair of glasses."

"If that's what's bothering you, I'll pay for them."

That gave Uncle Robert his cue. "Don't speak to me like that, sir! That's not the way to address the uncle who's done so much for you!" Pause. "And how on earth can you pay for them? I almost keep you. Any money you spend comes indirectly out of my pocket."

Bruce would like to have gone into it all carefully. He would like to have said: "Let's not confuse the issues.

Is this a matter of my hasty behaviour with Groom or of the general economic situation between us?" But of course he did not reply, and Uncle Robert took this for surrender.

"You have hurt your aunt more than I can say," said Uncle Robert. Then for the hundredth time: "What you really want is a downright good thrashing!"

"Well, Uncle Robert," said Bruce reasonably, "if you think it would do you any good, you can give me one."

He had not meant to put it like that. He really felt that he owed Uncle Robert something. He had infringed on the man's happiness and dignity and rights, and as Uncle Robert partially kept him, he felt genuinely ready to make amends in this way. It would be so easy. He felt almost sorry for his mean, posturing little uncle, and if it would restore his dignity and temper he would willingly let him beat him, seventeen years old though he was. But his way of expressing it, of course, infuriated Uncle Robert, who turned, as he always did under the most extreme provocation, to Aunt Eileen.

"You see! 'If it would do me any good.' He must insult *me* now. It's intolerable!"

"I didn't mean quite that. I meant if you . . . think it would balance accounts at all you can thrash me. I'll let you. Now if you like."

"Balance accounts—no! Nothing can do that. But it's what you deserve. And it's what I've a good mind to give you."

He looked round the drawing-room in which they sat, crowded with bric-à-brac. Bruce followed his glance to where Aunt Eileen sat, sewing rather nervously. The thing had taken an unexpected turn.

"All right, Uncle Robert," said Bruce cheerfully. "I'll go to my room, and you can come up there. Good night, Aunt Eileen."

He went upstairs. As he passed Great-Aunt Pittery's door the little old lady was standing in the half-darkness,

more beady-eyed and mischievous-looking than ever. "What's it all about, Bruce ?"

"Oh, I lost my temper with that silly ass Groom today and pushed his face in."

"Really ? My dear Bruce, how excellent ! Swollen nose ?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Black eyes ?"

"One, I believe."

"Splendid. I'm proud of you."

"I don't feel like that. Poor fool, he can't help it. I feel rather a beast. It spoilt their day."

"Nonsense. They loved it ! And now ?"

"Uncle Robert wants to give me a 'downright good thrashing', and I've told him he can."

"How very sensible of you, because of course he won't. Hasn't the pluck."

"Won't he ?"

"No."

"Good night, Aunt Pittery."

"Good night, dear boy. I shall sleep like a top tonight on the strength of that. I haven't been sleeping too well lately, either."

"You should count sheep coming through a gate till you drop off. It's a splendid idea for getting to sleep."

"I've got a far better one than that. I count my old lovers coming through the bedroom door, in the order they happened. And I've never yet got farther than my thirtieth year."

Slowly, ruminatively, he undressed. Was it cynical of him to be rather amused ? The idea of little Uncle Robert coming upstairs with a stick or something seemed to him honestly funny.

He always remembered those few minutes in which he undressed and sat, pyjama-clad, in bed, because they were, in a way, the most bitter of all his boyhood. So bitter that he laughed. He was no longer pained or lonely, no more an unhappy stranger among these people,

he was just amused because at seventeen years of age he was to be beaten by his uncle.

At last he heard footsteps on the stairs, and in a sickly moment he realized that he was betrayed. It was Aunt Eileen who was coming—Aunt Eileen with smooth, superior motherliness to tell him that his uncle had changed his mind. But Bruce felt he could not stand that. It was too late now to jump out and lock the door. Already she was tapping on it. Oh, hell! Oh, hell! Could nothing be done?

"Come in," he said.

"Bruce," Aunt Eileen began, "your uncle has decided not to punish you this time."

Bruce could not answer. He sat in bed, stiff and indignant. He felt red flushes passing over his body under his pyjamas. This was intolerable. "Aren't you going to let me tell him you're sorry?"

Still he could not speak. He wanted to shout some foul and opprobrious epithet to Aunt Eileen, something that would make her cry out with embarrassment and leave the room.

"Well?" she said.

Perhaps he looked on the brink of emotion, anyway she took his silence for repentance. She came and sat on the end of his bed. Actually—she did what his mother had done, she sat on his bed. He wanted to kick with all his force—to send her flying to the floor.

"I am sure you're sorry, Bruce, and we'll forgive you this time. Now you must make it up with Arthur Groom and we'll say no more about it."

He had a vomit-like fear that she might try to kiss him, so good was she, so forgiving. She looked at him, satisfied that her work was done. He could see that she was pleased with the interview, that she had a comfortable sense of having dispensed a silent and Christian forgiveness. Oh, would she never go? Could he have none of his life to himself? His aunt was being insufferably kind to him. At last she looked at him almost tenderly and said, "Good night, Bruce."

With a supreme effort, with almost muscular suppression, he managed to say "Good night, Aunt Eileen", and she went. Like a flash he leapt across the room and locked the door. Two o'clock struck from St. Mark's Church up the road before Bruce fell asleep that night.

CHAPTER IX

MARY

EIGHT months after Bruce told her about the picnic, Mary received a letter from Tito. It was on Claridge's notepaper, and announced his intention of coming down to see her that day. She had heard nothing of him for nearly a year, but that was not unusual. The lackadaisical climate of the South does not produce good letter-writers.

But to know that he was in England, would actually come to Fowl Row, was disturbing. Tito had not walked through her thoughts for a long time, had become almost as forgotten, though not so nebulous, a figure as Geoffrey. When she recalled Argentina he was always sturdily in the picture, but she scarcely ever let her imagination go back into the sunlight. And she was nervous, now that she was to see him again, now that he would come striding into her bar and overwhelm her—she knew—with his vigorous talk, tease her and make her laugh, stir again some long-quiescent thoughts.

There had been a settled and progressive peace in her life lately. Bruce was taking Matriculation soon and working hard. He still hated Greycaster and her sister's home, but he had grown quiet and philosophical about it, and no longer complained about Eileen. It seemed that she could persuade him through the time necessary for his examination, then, without disaster in Burnley Road, start him on some career. She herself had her wages increased and had a fair sum saved. Nothing till this had happened to make her apprehensive.

So perhaps just because it was a disruption the arrival of Tito was not altogether welcome. Her watchfulness for anything that might affect Bruce was roused. She

did not see exactly how Tito could upset the situation, but she felt that any innovation might in some way do so.

She had only just reached her little bar and was busily dusting, when he pushed in, and with dramatically extended arms, crossed to her. He was laughing and excited, like a boy let free. He kissed her volubly, to the amazement of the hall-porter who had followed him in.

"Dolorosa ! Dolorosita mia !" He returned to another outburst of loud kissing, his arms about her shoulders. She felt him hold her away from him a moment, look smiling into her eyes, then for the third time pull her close to him.

"Tito !" she said. "My dear, *cuidado un poco*. We're . . ."

But he could not listen to her. He wanted to talk and embrace her, to laugh again and almost weep. She smiled at the grinning, ingenuous pleasure on his face. And when at last she had calmed him a little, and got him on the other side of the bar, it was he who fired the first volley of questions.

"But what is this ?" he asked, as though suddenly remembering to be dismayed. "What are you doing here ? And that hideous old woman at the address you gave me ; what does it mean ?"

"I work for my living," said Mary, trying to treat his questions lightly.

"But, *carissima*, this is impossible ! You are . . . you serve this bar ?"

"Yes," Mary said. "I like it."

"You like it ? I see. My Dolorosa likes it. She enjoys working all day and living with a woman like a fish ! You are happy so ?"

"Fairly happy. You see Bruce . . ."

Tito remembered Bruce. "Ah, yes, there is Bruce. Perhaps it makes him happy for you to work here ?"

"Not exactly. But he had to go to school."

"But, my little Mary"—his mind was working quickly —"this must stop. I have come with news for you. I——"

Just then a couple of "regulars" came in. Tito made

a spluttering sound of disgust as Mary motioned him to move off the counter on which he was sitting.

" 'Morning, Mary. What's yours, James ?"

"Well, I think I'll get Mary to give me one of her gin-and-Its."

"Gin-and-It, then, and a bitter, please, Mary."

The two cast uneasy glances towards the bulky figure of Tito, clad in a noticeable dove-grey suit, pale suède shoes, and a rose-du-barry silk handkerchief lopping formidably from his breast pocket. He had grown a thick hostile moustache since Mary had come home, and he could no longer be termed merely brawny, full-grown, bulky—or indeed anything but definitely fat. Besides which he immediately lit a cigar of overpowering swarthiness and savour, and blew smoke into all parts of the room as he commenced an impatient march round the bar, awaiting their departure.

Finding that the "regulars" did not hurry, Tito turned to Mary. *"Pero es una desgracia,"* he said irritably.

("Thought he was foreign," breathed one of the "regulars", who was a student of detective fiction, to the other, who nodded sagely.)

"Y bueno," said Mary. *"Hay que esperar."*

That startled the two "regulars". Mary spoke his lingo ! This was an unprecedented situation. A big over-dressed dago stamping about their bar, talking French or German to Mary, who replied in the same tongue ! There was evidently something between them, too. The way he looked at her. . . .

"Going to have another ?" asked one.

"Do you know, I think I will," said the other, as though he were giving the world a surprise.

Tito groaned. *"Amiguita, no puedo. . . ."*

"Paciencia," smiled Mary. *"Quiere beber ?"*

"Si. Cognac," said Tito.

("Hullo. Wants brandy," whispered the criminologist "regular".

"Sounds like it," returned the other, who had understood the word too.)

Mary half filled a tumbler with liqueur brandy, for she knew Tito's habits. As he himself had often remarked, he did not often drink, but when he did he wished to light a fire in him. Another group of her customers entered just in time to see Tito tip the spirit back like water.

Conversation among the "regulars" was somewhat hushed that morning—nobody wanted to miss any part of this bewildering episode. Tito seemed unconscious of them except as a barrier to his being with Mary.

Presently a policeman came into the room, and, looking round for a minute, saw Tito. "Is that your car in the road, sir?" he said.

"Which one?"

"The big green one."

"Yes. That's mine."

"Well, will you tell your chauffeur to bring it into the yard, sir? He does not seem to understand what I say. It's not supposed to be out there."

"Very well." Tito hurried out.

Mary's customers looked expectantly towards her, wondering if she would feed their curiosity. She, a little flushed, was apparently absorbed in counting the packets of cigarettes which had just been brought in. In a moment was audible the purr of a car, intensified as it came through the arch of the hotel, and faint and droning in the yard outside the bar windows. Very casually one after another of her customers glanced out of the window. Within six feet of them was a jade-green Rolls Royce, pale and shining like a huge piece of polished precious stone, its metal lustrous in the sunlight. The chauffeur, an Ethiopic youth in a yellow dust-coat, was speaking to Tito.

"My God!" said one insurance agent.

"What a car!" groaned the other. And they glanced at Mary again. But they could not catch a smile on her face.

Tito returned. In such short time had he finished his cigar that he threw the stump viciously into the fireplace.

Then he took out a cigarette-case, a slim oblong of engraved gold with a jewelled watch face in its side, and selected a virulent black cigarette. "Another cognac, please," he said in English.

By now he had become a spectacle. Mary's customers conscientiously kept a conversation alive, but glances were wandering from the group to Tito. They saw him swallow his brandy, but with rather more care and relish, and then turn to Mary. His words they did not understand. Actually he asked when she would be free.

"Not till two o'clock," said Mary, also in Spanish.

"What am I to do?" asked Tito. "I must talk to you at once. You can't go on serving here!" He spoke petulantly, like a man who had always been given his own way.

Mary was amused at his fretfulness. "There is nothing for it, Tito," she said. Then, almost mischievously, "Go and look at the Castle and Cathedral," she said.

"Cathedral be damned," snapped Tito. "It's you I want to look at. And you stand there giving out drinks!"

"It's what I'm paid for."

"If I had known!" Tito turned away again while Mary served a couple of Worthingtons.

("He's Italian!" said the criminologist.

"Rot. He's a Greek," returned the drink-defaulting collector.)

Tito strode to the door. "Emilio," he called to the chauffeur. "Go and get yourself some lunch. But be here at two."

The chauffeur was seen to salute with an open palm and leave the hotel. Tito returned and threw himself into a chair. Curiosity flagged sufficiently to allow the brilliant batting of Woolley to be discussed with some interest, and Mary had time to consider Tito.

She thought him gross. Never in Argentina had he seemed to her so corpulent, or so theatrical. She was pleased to see him, pleased that he had jarred her customers, pleased that he was so glad of her again. But there was—no denying it—there was something vulgar

about him in this faded brown room. Full-blooded, fat, ostentatious ; he had never seemed so before.

And Mary thought of the Tito who had once been her friend, the frank, romantic-seeming boy, who had sung to his guitar and made her cry, so many years ago. She remembered the laughs they had shared, the tales he had told, the things he had given her, his sympathy with all her troubles then, and the way she would let him kiss her baby's forehead. She remembered how they had sat outside the Villa Rosada in the twilight with the glowing bulbs of electric light festooned down his garden, and heard the *bichufeo* iterating gently in the willows, and seen the Plate's jewelled body trembling for the moon. How they had drunk black coffee there night after night in the two years when she was his, and how he had twanged for her sometimes, his voice going sadly down to the water beyond them. And how he had never been irritable with her, or tired of making apostrophic love to her with such lyric tenderness that his very rhetoric convinced her. And how she had lain wide-eyed in his arms listening for Bruce's steady breathing, and how he had gathered her to him and comforted her even when he knew her mind was with her child.

And she looked again at his bulk, and the black length of his moustache and the clean-shaved cheeks that overflowed his collar when his head was down, and realized wistfully that she could never even like him very much again. He was corpulent and blatant, and he was biting his nails with impatience while she served her customers. He had bought everything he could think of on which money was spent. He was a middle-aged and rather satiated Latin.

Absently she served out another round of drinks to her "regulars", who did not even chip her this morning for wool-gathering. For a moment, by force of habit, she concentrated on giving them the right change. Then she looked again ruefully to the big man in the armchair.

At least it touched her that he should have returned. He had not forgotten her. Fourteen years since he had

possessed her—but he was always there, always ready to take care of her, always kind-hearted. . . .

He left the bar presently, saying he was going upstairs to get some lunch. Mary nodded as he went by, relieved, for a moment, by his absence.

"Your friend's got *some* car," said one of the insurance agents, making bold to broach the subject once and for all.

"Has he ?" said Mary. "I didn't notice."

"It was a Rolls. But what a colour ! He must be a Rajah !"

"No, he's not that."

It was too much for the criminologist. "Italian, isn't he ?" he asked, with marked casualness.

"No, he's an Argentine," Mary said.

Ah ! That was better. Getting on, now. One mystery cleared up.

The ice-cream vendor who had been in China seemed to think that anyone from so far abroad was his direct concern. "Plenty of money out there," he observed.

"There must be !" said the temperance-hotel keeper. "I thought as soon as I saw that car outside—hullo ! someone's got some money !"

There was a mild laugh.

"Have you been out there ?" asked the ice-cream man, as one traveller to another.

"Yes," said Mary. She was not to be drawn far.

"Like it ?" asked the solicitor.

"Yes, very much," Mary said, polishing a glass.

"Well, what about the 'other half' ?" asked the tobacconist, "then I must run !"

When Mary had seen the last of her customers depart and her bar was closed, she sank into the cushions of Tito's car to find his arm already placed behind her. "My Dolorosa ! What a life for you ! How long have you done that ?"

She was peeved. "About a year. But it's quite pleasant work."

"What, with all those *provinciales* to serve ? Mary !"

She felt unexpectedly loyal to her "regulars". They were fellow-countrymen, and Tito should not speak in that way. A suggestion of her old anger when he had been a shrugging neutral returned to her. "You mustn't talk like that!" she said.

"All right, my little Mary, I will talk as you wish. Now listen to me, pretty. I've got news. My wife has died."

Mary was silent. She had never seen Tito's wife. She knew that Tito had been very fond of her, and that she had become piteously insane about a year before the evening when he had first come home with her husband. Later Tito had mentioned her once or twice, but without much emotion. She recalled her own curiosity about her long ago, curiosity which no longer existed.

"So, Mary," said Tito suddenly, "why don't you marry me?"

"Marry you? Don't be absurd!" She had said it before she could think, snappishly, to cover the acute embarrassment.

Tito nodded with mock sadness. "So that is what I get for my proposal, after I have come seven thousand miles to make it—'Don't be absurd!' You're my *inglesita* right enough!"

"Oh, Tito—I didn't mean quite that. But it seemed such a . . . well, a fantastic suggestion. You see, I'm settled here, happy. Bruce is doing well at school . . ."

"But, Mary . . . yes, I know. But why fantastic?"

"That's all so long ago," she said vaguely. "I had almost forgotten the South."

"And me?"

"You're so different to all this"—she waved a hand to the last bungalows of Greycaster being left behind by the swift car.

"I should hope so." He paused. "Of course I'm no younger, Mary. I've got a round tummy, and I can't sing much now. But I'm very fond of you. I always was—you know that."

"I suppose so. We were awfully good friends."

"Why not again, then, good friends? I could make your life quite pleasant, I think. I would try so hard."

She looked aside at the tanned fullness of his cheeks with the bristly end of his moustache jutting across them, and smiled. He was rather nice—a boy still. However blatant he seemed in her bar with his overdressed opulence he was not, at least, crude enough—though he was tempted—to remind her of his wealth in words. He would always be a boy.

"But, Tito—what would be the use?" she said. "I like you all right. You are just the same as ever. But what have we got to give each other? You've got a terrible lot of money and a sentimental fondness for me, and I just a sort of friendly feeling for you. It would be rather silly, my dear."

He was hurt. "You are a frigid little creature, Mary. Just as you were before. Never believe half I say. I swear I love you."

She almost laughed. He was funny, this big affluent Latin, sunk comfortably into a corner of the seat, trying to shake off his pampered satisfaction with life enough to convince her. He had always had his own way, even women to whom his generosity had not been a matter of importance had given him all he wanted, which had not been much as their standards went. And while he had lain cushioned through a good many years he had remembered her with what he could manage of idealism. She had been, she intuitively knew, the one woman of whom he had not yet had enough. And now, forty-odd, grown rather short in wind and healthily sated, he came back to her for the rest. It was palpable, and rather comic.

"Tito, you mustn't mind my being amused. You are a dear, but such a simple big creature. You say you love me—and I suppose you think you do. You want me because you've never quite got the better of me, have you? But don't call it love, you old silly. It's nice and kind and rather poetic of you to come all this way to ask me. But let's be honest about it."

He looked sulkily out of the window. But after a moment his natural good-feeling surmounted that. "Little demon!" he said, and pinched her ear with a rather heavy attempt at playfulness. "You always talked like that. But you must think about it. There is Lindita, you know. She is fifteen now. . . . We're getting on, Mary."

"That's no reason for us to marry," said Mary coolly.

Tito considered a moment, very deliberately going through his hand before playing his trump-card. "Besides," he said at last, "there's the boy—Bruce. It would mean a lot for him."

Mary flushed and turned angrily to him. "That's not fair, Tito. That wasn't like you to say that."

He tried to caress her.

"No—I don't like you for that," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You don't even understand. Oh, let's go back!"

He immediately spoke to the chauffeur, who swerved the car deftly into a drive to turn it. "Mary, don't be cross. . . ."

"I am."

"Well, see here. You think it all over. I shall stay in London till I hear from you."

But she was still bitter. "You'll live there, then," she said.

"Think so?" smiled Tito, suddenly becoming strangely confident. "I don't."

Mary would not answer.

CHAPTER X

BRUCE

BRUCE found his mother rather silent about that time. They saw less than usual of each other, and when they were alone she asked him questions about his prospects with an anxiety he had never before known in her. And when one day he said: "Great-Aunt Pittery hasn't seemed well lately", his mother surprised him by saying nothing.

He enlarged on it as though feeling her to be indifferent. "You know she never says a word about her health. And this morning she told me, quite cheerfully of course, that she would not live much longer. It knocked me clean out."

"Did she really?"

"Mm. But she may not have meant anything. I hope not. She's a sweet old thing, Mother. If anything happened to her, I don't know what I should do up there. I don't think I could stick that house after that. You'd *have* to let me start working!"

"Don't talk about it. I don't suppose she meant anything."

But Mrs. Pittery had meant exactly what she said. There was to be one of Aunt Eileen's "parties" in Burnley Road a few evenings later, and the old lady chose the occasion to make what she called privately to Bruce "the official announcement of her forthcoming death".

The usual party, it was to be. Arthur Groom, his sister and his sister's friend, Tom, Paula, Bruce, Aunt Eileen, Mrs. Pittery, and Uncle Robert. There was also a friend of Aunt Eileen's, a Mrs. Gunn, who had never been to the house before, and certainly never came again. She

was a plain, usual woman—a widow. She had dressed with characteristic compromise between evening dress and a tea-gown, and her conversation was calculated to see her through any normal situation in Greycaster. It was, as Aunt Eileen admitted afterwards, a great mistake to have asked her.

Preparations were elaborate. It had been decided to use the dining-room for dancing, and the table had been taken to pieces, its mahogany frame-work put in the scullery and its polished leaves upstairs in Bruce's bedroom.

"I think we'll just have the things on a side-table in the drawing-room," said Aunt Eileen, "with small plates and spoons. Nice jellies and fruit and coffee, or drinks for the men. Then you young people can dance to your hearts' content in the dining-room."

Before Bruce had left the house in the morning all the plans had been made and half of them carried out. And when he returned in the evening from school he found everyone buzzing with excitement. The guests had begun to gather and a preliminary dance tune was being played, so Bruce went down to the dining-room. Uncle Robert had not appeared yet, but Aunt Eileen was there with Tom and Paula and the Groom contingent. She was confiding to Arthur's sister how pleased she was that she had decided in the end, when she was furnishing, to have the oil-cloth right over this floor, so that tonight, with the carpet rolled back, they would be able to dance.

Mrs. Gunn appeared, but Aunt Eileen's elaborate arrangements for announcements fell through, and Agnes put her head in the door and said, "The lady's here, Ma'am", so that Aunt Eileen had to hurry out and retrieve her from the hall. Thereafter she stood about until somebody thought it would be awfully tactful to address a remark to her, which happened fairly frequently, and was always met with an affirmative smile and an appropriate answer.

Soon Uncle Robert came down and the party was complete except for Mrs. Pittery. Conversation was

flowing enough and Aunt Eileen would not have looked so fidgety if it were not for the coffee. "Paula," she whispered, "just run up and see if Aunt Pittery's ready, dear."

But at that moment Mrs. Pittery appeared at the door. She wore a black silk dress, very charmingly made, Bruce thought, and with a little white lace collar and more jewellery than he had ever seen on her; she looked exquisite.

"Aunt Pittery!" exclaimed Paula. "How lovely!"

Mrs. Pittery smiled rather mischievously and stood quite still, perfectly at ease among them. Bruce found her a chair and she sat down, keeping her ebony stick in her hand. Bruce could see that Aunt Eileen was delighted that the little old lady should have dressed for their party—she had never done so before.

Presently they adjourned to the drawing-room, and food and drink were handed round. Arthur Groom hung a serviette over his sleeve and balanced plates in imitation of a waiter without marked success. Uncle Robert looked after the drinks, and in an excess of generosity asked Bruce what he would have. Mrs. Pittery ate nothing, but nobody seemed to detect anything strange in her manner except Bruce, who thought she was secretly unwell. Tom was with Arthur Groom's sister and her friend, and the conversation was fast and cheerful enough.

When the meal was over, Arthur Groom shouted "Speech!", and after protesting, Uncle Robert stood up and said he was glad to see them all there. Arthur Groom applauded this very loudly, and when the clapping had died down there was a momentary lull.

It was precisely at this point that Great-Aunt Pittery said across the room in a very clear voice, "Oh, by the way, Robert, I shall be dying this evening."

The immediate effect of this announcement was varied. Arthur Groom imagined that it was a mere piece of humour, and began a loud guffaw, which he skilfully turned into a cough when he found that no one else had taken it that way. Aunt Eileen was capable and under-

standing, and said quickly, "Now, Aunt Pittery, don't talk nonsense, dear, have a little whisky and soda, it will do you good." Mrs. Gunn looked rather as she would have done if Uncle Robert had started undressing in the middle of the room and everyone else had treated it as an everyday event. The Groom girls watched and listened in open-mouthed, harrowed, and intensely interested curiosity. Only Paula seemed to realize that Mrs. Pittery had meant what she said, and, crossing to her quickly, took her hand. "Aunt Pittery", she said helplessly.

"Now, Paula, don't be morbid, my dear; think of the pleasure of having a lifetime's curiosity satisfied!"

"I think," said Aunt Eileen hurriedly—"I think we may as well go back to the other room." But her suggestion seemed hardly to be heard. Everyone was watching Mrs. Pittery.

The old lady drew off her ring, and with a smile handed it to Paula. "You'd better have this, my dear. I always think jewellery's so out of place for this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" asked Uncle Robert, as though he had been hypnotized.

"My death, you know," said Great-Aunt Pittery. "As I said, it's taking place this evening. Rather tedious at my time of life. But quite a new experience. Have you ever done anything of this sort, Mrs. Gunn?"

Aunt Eileen's guest, who had been trying to find somewhere to look for the last five minutes, gave a sudden start, and said, "I? No," as though the question had been not unusual, if a little direct.

"Well, I think you're fortunate in some respects. I only hope that the future life doesn't follow the conventions too closely. I never could play the harp, and white doesn't suit me a bit. But then I don't think it will be at all as we calculate. I have a feeling that it's going to be full of surprises."

Bruce broke in. "Look here, Aunt Pittery, you mustn't talk like this. You're not going to die."

"I *am* going to die, thank you, Bruce; late this evening."

"Well, I think it's most inconsiderate of you, Mrs. Pittery," said Uncle Robert indignantly. "When we're having a party. . . ."

"Yes, I thought that might be how you would look at it, Robert. Only unfortunately death is not a thing one can postpone indefinitely."

"You know very well that I was referring only to this nonsense you are talking," said Uncle Robert sulkily, and drank some bottled beer.

"I've been shopping all the afternoon," said Mrs. Pittery pleasantly. "I think I've done everything." With her little white hand unshaken she took from her tasselled bag a tiny leather note-book. The people round her watched with fascinated wonderment. The situation had gone even out of Aunt Eileen's hands. Only Arthur Groom chuckled slightly as though he could appreciate a mistress of his own art making her supreme gesture and cracking jokes—as she understood them—in the face of a more or less finite irony. "Let's see," went on Mrs. Pittery, as she referred, it seemed, to a shopping-list. '*Dressmaker*. I've decided to die in black, and I've just bought this pretty dress. Don't you think it suits me?" She looked, twinkling, round the circle. Nobody answered, but she did not seem to be damped by their silence. "*Cemetery*," she went on. "Yes, I've fixed that up. Quite a pretty site, with a big elm tree in the background, and right next door to the late Lady Marchmont. I doubt if she'll call, though, she was always rather snobbish."

With anyone but Great-Aunt Pittery they would have been able to laugh it off as a joke. But they were all too accustomed to her not to know that she meant what she said. All of them, that is, except Mrs. Gunn. That unfortunate lady seemed to wonder in turns whether this were a practical joke, elaborately prepared to be played on her, whether Mrs. Pittery was a lunatic whom the family had to humour, or whether she had come to the wrong house.

The room was uncannily still as Mrs. Pittery picked up her note-book again. "*Undertakers*," she said. "I've ordered Blacketts. They do things very nicely, and they're not too lugubrious. I explained that I should not be here in person to receive them, but you will do that, Eileen, I am sure."

Aunt Eileen saw the last chance of smoothing things over. "Aunt Pittery," she said severely, "surely we've had enough of this gruesome talk. Let's go and play the gramophone." But the word gramophone died a hollow death on Aunt Eileen's lips, and nobody stirred.

"I'm sorry to delay your dance for a few minutes, Eileen, but I do want to make sure that everything's arranged properly. I couldn't bear to be buried all higgledy-piggledy. And you know, after all, one only dies once, and I think I'm entitled to a little consideration on my last evening among you."

Suddenly Uncle Robert clutched an idea. "How do you know it's your last evening, Mrs. Pittery?"

"Ah, there you have me, Robert. How does one know these things? The doctor told me a month ago that I might die any time, and when I got up this morning I suddenly realized that the time had come for changes. You know the feeling, Mrs. Gunn?"

"I assure you . . . I . . ."

Aunt Eileen broke in. "Well, if you knew this morning, Aunt Pittery, you should have said so and we'd have put you to bed and given you a hot-water bottle."

"But I didn't want a hot-water bottle. I wanted to enjoy my last day. It was so lucky you were having a party."

"You don't mean to say you're enjoying *this*?" said Uncle Robert miserably.

"I am, thoroughly," said Great-Aunt Pittery, and Bruce believed her. "Now let me finish my list. *Florists*. You should *see* the wreaths I've ordered. Your taste in flowers was never very good, Eileen dear, was it? So I've selected one for you. And there's a big bunch of

lilies coming tomorrow, which you must put in my arms so that I look like Faith, Hope, and Charity."

Suddenly Mrs. Gunn broke the silence. "Is this a joke ?" she said in a sepulchral voice.

Aunt Eileen went across to her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I should have explained to you. My aunt is rather eccentric, she sometimes writes stories, you know, and often says queer things. I think this evening she must be having a joke with us."

"She's having the joke of her life," said Mrs. Pittery. "At least I suppose death is the joke of one's life ?"

"Well, all I can say is, it's in very bad taste," remarked Uncle Robert.

"Yes, I suppose it is, in a way," said Mrs. Pittery. "At any rate in England. They do it far better on the Continent. You ought to see a French funeral ! I nearly crossed the Channel to have one. But then I thought I wouldn't deprive you of it. Now, I feel a little bit tired. I think if you'll excuse me I'll go to bed. Bruce, perhaps you would just see me upstairs ? Good night, Eileen. I've enjoyed my stay with you immensely. Good-bye, Robert. It's been a delightful visit. Good night, Mrs. Gunn. I hope you've had a pleasant evening. Perhaps we shall meet again some time. One never knows, does one ? It's such a small universe. Good-bye, Paula dear. Thank you for all you've done for me." She ignored Tom and Groom and the two girls and left the room on Bruce's arm. "Come up to my room in half an hour," she whispered, and left him on the landing.

When Bruce came down Mrs. Gunn was taking her leave. She had apparently recovered her gift for saying usual things. "I am sorry to have to go so early," she said.

"I'm *so* sorry that this has happened," said Aunt Eileen. "Of course none of us ever imagined . . ."

"No, no. I quite understand." Mrs. Gunn did not add that it was the kind of thing that might happen to anyone.

"You must come again some time," said Uncle Robert

importantly, "when . . . when we are more settled here." As they had lived in Burnley Road for over twenty years this was rather an enigmatic remark.

"Show Mrs. Gunn to the front gate, Tom, will you, dear? Good night, Mrs. Gunn. Good night."

They gathered in the dining-room where the furniture was cleared for dancing, but no one thought of putting on a record. "Well," said Uncle Robert to his wife, "I knew your aunt was capable of selfish behaviour, Eileen, but I never imagined . . ."

"But, Robert, suppose she is going to die?"

"She is," said Bruce suddenly. "Anyone could see that."

"Be quiet, Bruce," said Uncle Robert, glad to have an outlet for his indignation. "Well, if she is, she needn't have gone into those details. Particularly when we had a party."

"But, my dear," said Aunt Eileen, who, in spite of the novelty of the situation, could not help feeling that some awe was due to death. "We surely oughtn't to think of a party at the time of someone's passing."

"I don't know *what* to think," said Uncle Robert. "I don't know *what* to think." Which voiced the general sentiment.

"Well, I think she showed the most magnificent courage," said Bruce. "And I hope I shall be able to meet death like that."

Uncle Robert was just going to break out again when Arthur Groom unexpectedly said: "It *was* rather sporting, you know."

"Of course it was," said Paula. "It was magnificent. She's always been like that, and she meant not to change when she knew she had got to die."

"Yes, but think of poor Mrs. Gunn!" said Aunt Eileen.

"Oh, never mind Mrs. Gunn," said Bruce, moved out of his usual taciturnity with the family. "What's a Mrs. Gunn more or less in the world? I think the way Mrs. Pittery talked was one of the noblest things I've ever heard."

"Well, I think it was wicked," said Aunt Eileen, "to joke about such things. Ordering her own undertakers, indeed. It's blasphemous!"

"Why?" asked Bruce.

"Because it is," said Aunt Eileen.

"Do you think she's really going to die, then," asked Arthur Groom—"tonight?"

"Oh, of course she is," said Paula, impatient, and very near tears.

"She may even be dead now," said the friend of Arthur Groom's sister with appropriate awe.

"Do you think you had better go up to her, Eileen?" asked Uncle Robert.

"She told me to go in half an hour's time," said Bruce.

He left them going to and fro over the situation and ran upstairs to Great-Aunt Pittery's door. She called, "Come in!" in answer to his tap, and he found her in bed, looking very tiny and fragile, with a boudoir cap over her white hair.

"Sit down, Bruce," she said, "and don't be afraid, because I'm not going to subject you to expiring sentimentalities."

"I'm not afraid," said Bruce.

"I meant what I said downstairs. It's really quite peculiar, but I'm dying tonight, dear boy. I know it definitely. I think I was rather a success this evening, don't you?"

The roguishness was still there. She really had enjoyed herself. "I'm sure you were," said Bruce.

"They didn't laugh quite as much as they do at Groom's humour, but then one cannot expect it. And that poor, wretched woman who had been invited to the party!"

"Really, that was rather unkind!" smiled Bruce.

"Rubbish, Bruce; it will do her a world of good. It's given her something to think about for weeks. But that's not what I want to talk about. It's you. What are you up to, Bruce? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, do it, anyway. Don't let them put you off. The good gesture because it is a good gesture, not because it leads anywhere."

She seemed a little exhausted then and lay back. Bruce could say nothing. He took her hand. "Confound it!" said Great-Aunt Pittery suddenly. "This is a death-bed scene. And I never meant to have anything like that. Don't let's start waving good-bye to each other on the platform, Bruce. Surely we've got too much sense of humour."

"Aunt Pittery," said Bruce at last, "you're wonderful. I hope I can do it like that."

"Rubbish, Bruce. I'm thoroughly intrigued by the whole situation. Well, you can tell them downstairs that you left me quite happy and that I don't want to be disturbed. Good-bye, Bruce. You might put the light out. I'm not a bit afraid of the dark."

CHAPTER XI

MARY

In the moment that Bruce told Mary that Mrs. Pittery was dead she knew that she must marry Tito. The spiky doubts that had worried her since he had spoken of Bruce were eased at once by a narcotic certainty.

When she was alone in her small square room, with the window open over the squalor of Fowl Row, she tried to realize what it would mean, conscious now of its inevitability. She remembered that other time when she had given herself to him, taken her baby and arrived on his doorstep one morning. But at that time if she had not loved him she had convinced herself that she had done so, whereas now she had no illusions. She had not the smallest pretence of love for Tito.

Mary peered listlessly from the window to where two men were repairing the road and a group of grubby children watched them. She could no longer be calm. What she had to do was very difficult for her. Tito—crass now and sensual, sure of her in his amused, confident way, waiting perhaps impatiently but without doubt that she would come—the thought was almost obscene. She would have to sleep with him again—that great hirsute body would be plunged into bed beside her, breathing stertorously into the night! She would have the privacy of her room invaded by his heavy masculinity, the quiet places of her heart disturbed by his throaty laugh!

And could she? Could she bear to live again with his covetous eyes on her! His damned proprietary swagger with her? It had all been easy enough long ago, when Bruce was small and Geoffrey dangerous. She had been happy at the Villa Rosada then, and Tito had been a boy

almost as easy to control as Bruce. But now . . . that laugh . . . that moustache . . . Tito owning her. . . .

She cried a little, up at her window. Tears of a middle-aged woman, she thought, no real abandonment, quiet, well-controlled tears that hurt her mind but scarcely swelled her eyes. The world was a matter of calculation —frigid and mathematical. Even now as she tried to contemplate the future she felt her emotions well trained to serve her purpose. She was to marry a man she did not love, who rather repelled her, and she felt no grief or disappointment, only a heartsick disdain which was somehow connected with his prickly moustache and the thought of his brown bulk raising the bed-clothes into a heaving mountain beside her.

He would shave in their bedroom. She remembered, even now, how an immense jug of hot water used to be brought in while Mary was still in bed, with Bruce, then in his second year, beside her. And Tito, standing in trousers and singlet, his silk braces hanging, a forked tail, behind him, and his stomach protruding like a smooth inflated cushion, would lather his chin vigorously. He seemed to enjoy it. Mary would lie watching with senseless irritation. Just when she thought the thick white cloud round his chin was sufficient, he would dab the brush again in soap and water and run it up and down interminably. Then perhaps again. It was unendurable.

After that he sharpened his razor. To and fro, to and fro, long after its edge was perfect. In vain she would shift her position impatiently in bed, as though to warn him that her patience was exhausted, while he went on sharpening and talking with maddening unconsciousness of her fever. Last would come the steady rasp, rasp, as he shaved. Against her will she would watch the thick clots of soap fall from the blade to the wash-stand as he scraped his cheeks. Rasp. Rasp. It was as though he were poking with cruel fingers at one after another of her nerve-centres.

And then—and then—when he had scraped the last soap-sud from his face, he would start where he began,

and re-lather with cheerful enthusiasm. It became one day intolerable. "Tito!" she burst out, "couldn't you shave in the bathroom?"

"Why?" He was busy rubbing a pomade into his cheeks.

"It's very fidgeting," said Mary. "You could do it just as well in there."

"But I prefer to shave here. Then I can talk to you at the same time." His equanimity was untouched, he had not noticed the urgency in her voice.

"Well, I can't stand it!" Mary burst out. "Scrape, scrape! It's enough to drive me off my head!"

Tito turned round. He was shocked and surprised at her outburst. He was ready to make allowances for Mary—after all, she was English, and had a strange conception of a woman's place in the house. But when it came to interfering with his own liberty—that was outrageous. What on earth would his friends think if they knew his woman complained of his shaving wherever he wished?

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to put up with it."

That was Tito, thought Mary, pondering at her window. Generous and considerate enough because he enjoyed being so, but when it came to the real give-and-take of life at close quarters, well, he was a Latin, master of the house whatever happened. However, she sighed, he was a good sort really. He had always done his best for her comfort and happiness, and her baby's, within his limitations.

That she was to go to him again seemed suddenly a matter of small importance to herself. She could not find enough emotion about it to feel exultant or depressed; she cried as an actress might, with still-born cold tears and an unstirred heart. Marrying now seemed to be no more than something vaguely made distasteful by a thick moustache, a throaty laugh, and a proprietary swagger, so far as she herself was concerned. But there was Bruce.

Then Mary, absently fingering the white cord of the spring blind, smiled her old musing smile, and was again as young as the girl who had rocked a rickety second-hand cradle in the *patio*. For she was thinking what this would mean to Bruce. She could take him from Greycaster, from this sinister, glum town that he hated, from the senseless smirking people in Burnley Road. She would have a tutor for him and he should go to Oxford, should choose what career he liked. She would buy him the things he was young enough to love, a car, horses to ride, clothes, dogs, books. She would arrange attractive rooms for him, a piano—he should have all the sport he wanted and all the companions. Her mind luxuriated gaily among these thoughts. She would make Tito take a place in the country, and she would have Bruce with her, and see him, as he deserved to be, waited on, nourished, free to develop as he wished.

She could see him tearing in from the tennis-court to her room, bright-eyed and enthusiastic about the game he had just played. She imagined herself seeing him off, tweeded and happy, to the golf-club. He should have the car he chose—some powerful great two-seater if she knew him—and he would take her blazing through the country in it. They would go together to London, to theatres, dances. . . . He would love it all. Money for Bruce's sake was really important.

And those were only the little things. His chance in life—he should have any girl he liked for a wife, Mary was not afraid of that. She wanted him to marry when he was ready. She had thought about it often and quickly curbed the least tendency to jealousy she might have felt. So long as it was no one like that insipid daughter of Eileen's, she would help him. And his career . . . what would that be? She wanted him to succeed brilliantly. Politics, perhaps. Tito's money, Bruce's own ability . . . anything he liked. . . .

She had shut out such seductive thoughts for days, ever since Tito had hinted at this. She had dimly known that if she let herself remember what Tito could do for

Bruce she would go to him at once. And it had not then seemed possible. It was only when Bruce had come to her, his face drawn and grey, and told her about Mrs. Pittery, that her last defence went down. Of course he could not stand that house any longer. Death had been there. He had lost his friend. She could not let him go on. And she would not. She had long ago promised Bruce his England. The time had come for him to inherit it.

She felt, on the other hand, little excitement at the thought of having Lindita with her again. It would be a restrained and difficult relationship . . . a secret hidden between them. She had for so long learnt to banish thought of her daughter, that now, in the prospect of their living together again, Mary was almost fearful. . . . But it would "turn out all right"—everything was going to be solved by this marriage . . . somehow or other, everything. Tito would see to that. . . .

Calmer now, Mary decided to go and telephone Tito. She would make no fuss about it—not try to pretend anything, just ring him and tell him flatly that she would marry him. It would be the most natural way. And if he were not sufficiently accustomed to her erratic decisions by now . . .

She went out to the public telephone-box at the corner. An old gentleman had just reached it, but seeing her approaching he courteously paused. "Is yours important?" he beamed.

"Oh, not a bit, thanks," said Mary. She smiled, wondering what he would say if she added, "I just want to arrange to get married!" But she had spoken the truth. It was not important really. Not really . . . for herself.

When at last she got through to Tito she began calmly, "Tito . . ."

"Dolorosa! How are you? I have been waiting for you to call!"

"Have you?"

"Yes, my dear. For so long!"

"Why?"

"Oh . . . I wondered . . ."

"Well, you're right. I think I will marry you, Tito."

She heard his chuckle. "You think you will? *Carissima!*"

For a moment it seemed unreal, as though she were speaking into any cup-like instrument, as though there were no one at the other end of the line. "I mean . . . really . . ." she said.

"Of course! Darling little Dolorosa! You've been a long while. I've been getting so tired of London. . . ."

"I—didn't meant to . . ." she said feebly.

"No, of course not. I understand. But you will? I have a licence all ready."

"You have?" She felt a flood of anger. He had known, of course. He had known from the moment when he had watched her redden in the car at his mention of Bruce. She had one last impulse to change her mind. She felt like saying that this was a joke, that she could not possibly marry him. Teach him to be so damned cocksure! But what was the use? She meant to marry him. To talk like that would be simply flirtatious and stupid. Like a servant-girl.

"When will you come up to town?" asked Tito.

"When you like."

"I'll send the car for you tomorrow, then," he said.

He might have been taking her to the theatre! Yet there was something she almost respected in his sleek assurance.

She asked him what time, and he told her. There was a long pause.

"Dolorosa . . ." said Tito at last.

"Yes?"

"I love you . . ." She could catch a kindly mocking in it.

Mary turned to more serious matters. "You won't forget your promise?" she said.

"What promise?"

"That we stay in England till Bruce is grown up."

Was she arranging a house-party or the rest of her life? Was the conversation actually hers with the man she was to marry? Mary's mind swayed gently.

"I shan't forget. Wherever you wish, Dolorosita. There shall be nothing but your wishes . . ."

Mary became abrupt. "Tomorrow, then," she said. "Good-bye."

"*Hasta mañana!*" said Tito, and they rang off.

Mary stood a moment, her hand still unconsciously clutching the receiver where she had hung it on the hook. How easy, really, to dispose of oneself. How trivial. She had made a satisfactory deal. That's all it was. Suddenly very tired again, and nearly tearful, Mary walked back to her rooms. Settled. Anyway, she had fixed it all. And it did not matter. . . .

She came back into the dingy house in which she had lived for two years, and found Mrs. Sobbins in the kitchen, eating with despondent relish. "I'm leaving you," said Mary.

Her landlady showed no surprise or concern. "Oh, well, they come and go. Here today and gone tomorrow. I had an idea you wouldn't stay long as soon as you told me about those spiders you found on the stairs. It can't be helped. I'm sure I've done my best for you. That's what I used to say to my husband. 'Whatever happens to you I shall have done my best.' And when he died of diphtheria he admitted it. A trained nurse, he said, could not have done better. It was a nice thing to say, especially as I'd got his medicine muddled up with the stove polish that morning."

"Well, we can't all be angels, Mrs. Sobbins."

"That's what I thought. So the sooner I made him one the better. But he was a good husband to me. Always ready to fit in. And he did fit in nicely at the last."

Mary smiled absently. Funny, this life of squalid uncertainty, in which this grotesque old woman had played a daily part. Funny to think that in these two years, by living at Mrs. Sobbins', she had saved nearly

a hundred pounds—and that it counted for nothing now. She had heard this strange crone's grumble almost every day since she came to England, and now Fowl Row would seem as foreign to her as Chinatown.

She thanked her, and paid her, then went upstairs to pack. She tried to shake off this weary nausea that had settled on her mind since she had 'phoned Tito. In a few nights she would be his again—inexorably now. She would lie in his big arms and hear his old, well-practised phrases. Outside their door in London would stand his rather pointed shoes beside her own . . . comic. That was comic. Tito's shoes and her shoes, side by side again. . . . Mary laughed. Tito's shoes, her shoes, two in a bed, black moustache, throaty laugh . . . it was all fantastic. . . .

She almost ran down to tell Mrs. Sobbins that she had been dreaming. Of course she would stay here. After two years . . .

Perhaps she was a little hysterical. She was not young, she told herself. At nearly forty hysteria might be expected to disturb a bridal eve. Bridal eve! Comic again. . . . "For I'm to be married today, tra-la!" She was to be a bride; he had the licence ready. He knew—that big smiling Tito knew all about her.

Quickly Mary looked at her watch. It was time to set off for her bar. She would say good-bye to all her "regulars". They would laugh when they knew.

But they did not laugh. "Good lord!" said the quiet-voiced insurance agent. "Going to get married? Congratulations, Mary!"

"What's this I hear?" grinned the ginger-haired hairdresser. "My little Mary getting married? Well, well, well!"

Then the psychic insurance agent came in and made everyone feel uncomfortable by saying he had known it. He had seen in a dream her being led out of a church by a brontosaurus. The tobacconist covered the awkwardness of that by asking who was the lucky man.

Mary, conscious of being in her bottle-lined corner for

the last time, conscious that in their emasculated way they liked her, were sentimentally regretting her departure, turned to them serenely and said, "Why, the Argentine, of course ; the man who was here a fortnight ago."

That seemed to startle them, and a new embarrassment settled over the room. Such an engagement was too outlandish to fall well into the category of "Marriages arranged" which they knew. "That fellow!" they said inwardly, much as Geoffrey might have done.

But again the breach was filled, this time by the young solicitor, who said he must stand champagne to congratulate her. And Mary laughed happily—rather touched. Then the bookselling brothers came in and rejoiced sufficiently to drink a very fair share of the wine, which, to do them justice, they were alone with the young solicitor in enjoying. The factory-manager voiced the general opinion when, after drinking half a glass, he said, "Let's get back to a bitter, Mary."

The ice-cream vendor got Mary alone a minute to say that if she intended going out to "that climate" she would be well advised to take a sun-helmet. He had found one indispensable in China. And everyone shook hands with her before they trooped out at ten o'clock, and wished her "all the best" and "cheerio".

Mary went home to her room, which was bare now with her trunk standing sullenly under the window, and undressed slowly. "For the last time . . . for the last time . . ." she thought.

She had decided not to tell Bruce till after it was over. He might ask difficult questions.

PART TWO

Silliwake

CHAPTER XII

BRUCE

On the Saturday afternoon after Great-Aunt Pittery's death, Aunt Eileen, Bruce, and Uncle Robert sat over the remains of their lunch in the dining-room in Burnley Road. A suet pudding, cold now and viscous, was in front of Aunt Eileen, and Uncle Robert's empty beer-glass stared up at him with froth-ringed eye. There was always a large lunch on Saturday, because Uncle Robert came home for it, and Bruce felt heavy and drugged by the food he had eaten and the inactivity of the last few days.

Hellish days they had been. No work to occupy his mind, for the holidays had begun, and the hollow emptiness of a house, without Mrs. Pittery, to echo his thoughts back to him whichever way they turned. He had not seen his mother since he had told her, for she had mysteriously asked him not to come down for a time. And since his loss he had been too stunned and too wretched to go out with Peter and the Mouse.

And the conversation had turned inevitably that afternoon on the way he had been "moping".

"You see, Bruce," said Uncle Robert, "you have had five days to get over your great-aunt's death."

"Of course we know that you feel it, Bruce, but, then, naturally, we all did. She was my aunt, you must remember."

"Yes," said Bruce.

Uncle Robert was in his most patient and considerate mood, and Bruce thought that if he would not keep sucking his teeth with a liquid click he would have been almost helpful. He might even have become

mpathetic were it not for a timely ringing of the front-door bell.

"I wonder who that can be," murmured Aunt Eileen, for the front-door bell out of hours was always something of an event in Burnley Road.

Agnes entered. "A gentleman, Ma'am. I didn't catch the name. He said he was Mrs. Kerry's solicitor."

"Solicitor," said Aunt Eileen. "Why, I never knew she had such a thing. Show him into the drawing-room, Agnes. Fancy! A solicitor. Will you see him, Robert? Bruce, dear, don't put your cigarette out on your plate. It makes more work—washing up."

"We'd better go in together," said Uncle Robert.

Bruce watched them leave the room, their faces made anxious by the unusualness of it, and he wondered how many times that harassed pair had faced such things before. He felt a reluctant warmth towards them; they were, after all, so simple, so easily out of their depth, and finding themselves thus, so ready to clutch hands. The arrival of a solicitor was a critical reminder to them that they had come into contact with the unknown, with the life outside their own crustacean existence. It was like a telegram. So, together, they must have read of the declaration of war, of the death of his father, of a serious illness of Tom's when he was at school. And even if it were only habit which made Uncle Robert say, "We'd better go in together", there was something rather touching in it.

Agnes put her head in the door. "*You're* wanted, Mr. Bruce," she said, not disguising her own surprise.

Bruce found them sitting in the drawing-room, and was introduced to Mr. Bukeley, a suave, grey-haired, tweed-clad man, whom he liked at once.

"Mr. Bukeley tells us that you are affected by this, Bruce," said Aunt Eileen, as though grudging his presence at such a strictly family conference.

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Craig," said Mr. Bukeley, "he is the person most materially affected. But I'm sure you would prefer to hear the details together."

"Certainly," said Uncle Robert firmly.

"Well, let me tell you first that Mrs. Kerry was married yesterday."

For once Bruce and Aunt Eileen were in chorus. "Married!" gasped Aunt Eileen, while Bruce, whose mind worked more quickly, said, "Who to?" Aunt Eileen's pince-nez had fallen unheeded to her lap. Bruce had flushed scarlet.

"To Dr. Ernesto Montéz of Buenos Aires."

There was a foolish gasping pause. Aunt Eileen remotely groped for her glasses. Uncle Robert made a slight sound in the roof of his mouth. And after a moment Bruce exclaimed, "Good lord! Uncle Tito!"

"*Uncle* Tito?" said Eileen with dental disgust and amazement.

In a moment the three of them had been changed. They had been ready to hear anything from the solicitor, they had sat in rigid expectation. But this was frankly beyond them. Aunt Eileen had become a woman gasping for strength, for mental coherence with which to confront the matter. Uncle Robert was too bewildered to lose his temper. And Bruce . . . Bruce, after the first surprise, began to master the thing jubilantly. His mind had been stopped like a motor, and almost at once he had smoothly changed gear and was away up the hill. His mother . . . Uncle Tito . . . she had loved him all along, then . . . her secret romance . . . writing letters all this time . . . now she would be happy . . . leave Greycaster. . . .

"It's impossible," managed Aunt Eileen at last.

"I assure you, Mrs. Craig," said the solicitor with a faint smile, "I assure you it has taken place. They were married very simply in a register office yesterday."

"Who is this man?" asked Uncle Robert explosively.

"Dr. Montéz is a member of an extremely old Argentine family, Mr. Craig. He is a lawyer by profession, but he is also a landowner—a millionaire, I believe."

Aunt Eileen then lost control of herself. She seemed

to forget the presence of the solicitor. Almost in tears she said, "Oh, it's wicked and deceitful. To go off like that without a word and get married to a foreigner and after all we've done for her. It's a shame! My own sister. . . . He may be *black* for all we know. . . ."

Bruce smiled. "He's not black," he said. "He's a ripping chap. He and mother have been pally for years. . . ."

"So that's it," said Aunt Eileen; "someone she was going round with in that abominable country. What will people say?"

"I've always told you, Eileen, it would be unwise for your sister to live in this town, with my position to keep up here. First she works in a bar—that was bad enough —and now she's gone off with a dago. It's very hard on me, really it is!"

The solicitor waited courteously until they had both paused. "There are one or two things I must go into, Mr. Craig. First it is the Señora de Montéz's wish. . . ."

"The who?" cried Aunt Eileen.

"Your sister's," said the solicitor.

"*What* did you call her?" asked Aunt Eileen.

The solicitor kept his temper. "The Señora de Montéz," he said.

Uncle Robert in his bitterness gave birth painfully to humour. "It sounds like a fortune-teller," he said.

"It is her wish," said the solicitor, "to reimburse you for the expense you have had in taking charge of her son. . . ."

Suddenly Bruce realized, as the man spoke of "her son", what this news meant to him. He would leave Burnley Road! He would go to his mother! Oh, God. . . .

But Uncle Robert was almost shouting. "The suggestion is insulting!" he said. "Does my sister-in-law imagine that I shall take money from such a source? How much does she propose to pay?"

"She wishes you to let me know what you consider the expense has been."

"I never heard of such a thing. As if money could change hands over such an affair. Besides, I'm afraid it would be a very large sum."

Bruce rose to leave the room. He could stand no more of this. He wanted to think . . . be alone.

"One moment, Mr. Kerry," the solicitor called. "Your mother hopes you will join her as soon as she has taken a suitable house. She wants to live somewhere in the country. Meanwhile, Dr. Montéz imagined that you might like to entertain your school-friends before leaving them. He asked me to hand you this for the purpose."

Bruce automatically took the wad of notes.

"Take care of it," went on the solicitor with a friendly smile, "there are twenty five-pound notes there."

"A hundred pounds?" gasped Uncle Robert.

"That is the sum, sir. It was Dr. Montéz's wish that Mr. Kerry should take his friends to London if he wanted."

Aunt Eileen spoke with shocked irrelevance. "But there's a cheap day-return for four shillings," she said.

Bruce ran from the room, leaving them to settle the rest of the matter in their own way. He went to his bedroom. Uncle Tito! He remembered his visits to them in San Isidro, always laughing and making his mother laugh, bringing them presents and taking them down to Buenos Aires in the car. How his mother used to sit with him in the *patio* long after they had finishd tea in the afternoon, and talk. . . . Bruce used to listen, then because their conversation went on to subjects that interested him no more, run and find Julio and Lindita, and come back hours later to find them still gassing. Tito would shout, "Hullo, Bruce, back again? What have you been up to, you young devil?" Which for some reason he liked. And the glorious times they had all had—his mother, Tito, Bruce, Julio, Lindita—like one family, off in the car to bathe. He remembered an afternoon at the racecourse when a man in conversation with Tito had referred to Mary as his *señora*, and how they had all laughed about it. . . .

Lord, why had not he seen it then ? He might have realized that his mother and Tito had been desperately in love with each other for years. How great ! Now Tito had come over, asked her to marry him, and they had done it, and kept it as a glorious surprise for him. With a deepening sense of drama he remembered the story of Tito's wife. That was it ! They could not marry before, but they had been in love. It was like a beautiful play. . . .

And for him . . . escape from Greycaster ! Just when this house had become unendurable, just now that he could not bear another moment of dependence on Aunt Eileen and Uncle Robert without even Great-Aunt Pittery's support, had happened this colossal good fortune. Tito had pots of money—he would be able to go to Oxford after all. They were taking a place in the country . . . riding again . . . it was all incredible. He would have Peter and the Mouse to stay with him . . . he could buy what he liked. . . .

It went to his head a little. Up in his Smetham bedroom the vision of the house they would take, of the life of sport and pleasure with his darling mother, became a celestial but vivid dream. He could see it all ahead of him . . . freedom . . . air . . . new friendships . . . love perhaps . . . nothing to stop him. . . .

Suddenly he remembered the hundred pounds in his pocket. He must spend. The Mouse, Rix, and he—to London ! All the things he had wanted to do and never done : a wonderful dinner, a theatre, a night in a good hotel. . . . Quickly he pushed a suit of pyjamas into an attaché-case and opened the door. On the landing the clock ticked loudly to the dull brick-and-yellow wallpaper. He could smell the house beneath him—the stale Smetham smell. He must get out at once.

He judged that the conference was over downstairs, for he had remotely heard Aunt Eileen go into her room. He went to her door and tapped, was told to come in, and obeyed. His aunt was sitting by the window. Bruce looked round the crowded room, filled by its immense

brass bedstead and Spanish mahogany dressing-table, with the vague smell of camphor over it. Then he saw that she had been crying. "Aunt Eileen . . . " he began.

"Well, Bruce ?"

"You're not really upset by this ?"

"We are. Very. It's a most unexpected thing to have happened."

"But . . . you don't understand. He's a fine man. They've been in love for years—only they couldn't marry because Uncle Tito had a wife. . . ."

"You needn't go further, Bruce. It's all too sordid. You can't possibly understand the terrible thing your mother has done. Marrying a man like that ! I don't know what *her* mother would have said. Then this hundred pounds . . ."

"Well, that was decent of Uncle Tito."

"Bruce, don't you use that expression to me ! *Uncle* Tito ! It's a great deal of money. You don't realize."

"Yes, it's a good bit."

"You know you've no idea of money. You'll only go and spend it. It would have been so much better if she had sent it to your Uncle Robert to help you with—judiciously, of course."

"Oh, I know what to do with it, Aunt Eileen."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Bruce. What have you got an attaché-case for ?"

"I'm going away for the week-end."

"You never told me."

"I didn't know."

"I see. You're going to start spending your money. There you are ! I knew how it would be !"

"But why not, Aunt Eileen ? What else is the money for ?"

"It's not for squandering on pleasure. As if there wasn't enough to talk about and arrange here, without your going off like this !"

"I shall be back on Monday, and we can talk things over then. Good-bye, Aunt Eileen."

"Good-bye, Bruce, I know it's no good talking to

you. You always were an obstinate boy. Only don't be extravagant, now."

It was a wild, amazing evening. London was still a stronghold of Bruce's imagination. He had never lost his faith in a wonderful English life outside Greycaster, had implicitly believed his mother that the towns in which he had lived were an ugly blotch on a fair face—nothing more. And for him London was a glittering city, full of strange people who talked a language almost foreign to Smetham, the language of books, of music, of travel; who sat in remarkable postures over their drinks and reduced the whole chaotic world to the clear terms of their satisfying creeds; who understood (this the essential) what was wrong with the world, and who did not coldly set it right only because it was too much trouble to do so. Or who were immersed in activities of vast moment, re-shaping the lives of humanity one way or another, or who lived merely among exotic pleasures.

And that evening had no disappointments. It was warm, spring weather, and the sky showed above the cañons of houses through which they walked, a magnificent stormy blue. The streets were crowded, and the people . . . the people looked as he had believed them to look, infinitely assorted, sufficiently bizarre. There were faces that he saw that night, for a moment in passing, that he never forgot. There were snatches of conversation that he heard which became to him like critical passages in his own life.

They went first to a shop in Shaftesbury Avenue, known to the Mouse, to buy Bruce a dinner-jacket.

"It's a jolly good place," the Mouse said omnisciently. "All the theatrical people go there. You get suits made by the very best West End tailors that have been misfits, or not paid for."

They chose his suit, spending half an hour in knowing discussion of waist-line and braid.

The Mouse had grown into a lean and thoughtful member of London University, his face seeming tighter-drawn, and his eyes blinking weakly behind spectacles.

He was very sure about everything, too absorbed in sheer study to be greatly perplexed by problems beyond his work. Tonight he was in his element, showing them his (somewhat second-hand, it must be owned) knowledge of the West End.

"We'll go to the May Fair Hotel," he said when Bruce was equipped. "Suit us, and we can change."

It had frequently been a problem among them that Bruce was alone in having no dinner-jacket. But tonight in a pale-pink bedroom with running water at his hand, Bruce changed into one for the first time, and felt substantial between the two. They had adjoining rooms and met in Bruce's to survey one another critically.

"The heir, by Jove," said Peter. "Bruce, you're a tailor's dummy." And the Mouse admitted that Bruce "could certainly wear his clothes!"

But as yet Bruce was not satisfied. He felt that the lift-boy had known all about them, that the hotel was humouring them as "country cousins" with a bit of money to spend. "We must have a few drinks," he said.

"Champagne cocktails are the things to put you on your feet," said the Mouse, and downstairs they ordered them.

After three rounds Bruce began to feel more weighty. "Shall we dine here?" he suggested.

"It's a good dinner," said the Mouse, "but I think it would be more fun to go somewhere else."

After discussion the Berkeley was decided on, where Bruce ordered champagne by the simple expedient of choosing the most expensive.

"Excellent caviare, this," said the Mouse, a veteran connoisseur, eating it for the first time. But he joined readily in the laughs of the other two when he saw that the pose was suspected.

Six hours later, after they had been to a musical comedy, and questioned the theatre commissionaire as to where they could find a "really cheery night-club"—looking as they did so the very picture of eager but diffident provincialism—and danced with several tired

females at a place called the "Slippered Hesper", and persuaded themselves that it had been tremendous fun, and taxied home with sobriety almost recovered, Bruce tumbled into a downy bed.

"Well, it's been a marvellous evening," said the Mouse. "Thanks most awfully."

"Yes, bloody good," echoed Peter ; "you're a sportsman, Bruce."

"Oh, rot," said Bruce. "Good night."

Somehow he felt though, as they disappeared through the door, that the trio was breaking up. He was a bit sentimental about his friends—it was a long time now since they had determined that it should last for ever. After all, in a sense they were of the same world, these two comrades of his and himself. Tonight they had faced the same little problems of deportment, each of them disguising his doubts in the hotel and restaurant, each of them assuming a mask of boredom at the night-club. And he felt an unexpected resentment with London, and with the wealth on which he had already entered, for having put the Mouse out of his depth. The Mouse who had read everything, who understood the aims of the Labour Party and the philosophy of Spinoza ! It was absurd that such intellect as the Mouse's should have an inferiority complex awakened merely by an overcrowded and expensive night-club, that a mind so brilliant should be forced into subterfuge that it might hide its owner's inability to cope surely with the habits of the rich. He had heard the Mouse dismiss half a dozen of the world's great men in half an hour, cleverly desiccating them over a glass of beer. He had seen a paper of his in a monthly review which had effectively proved that Epstein—or Einstein, he could not remember which—was entirely up a gum tree. And yet this evening he had pretended—actually pretended—to be rather sick of eating caviare. It stirred Bruce's loyalty. Damn it ! All this rotten money, all these cocksure, town-bred people, were not worth his friend's mind. He felt almost ashamed of his new inheritance.

Peter was different. Peter did not care whether he seemed at home or not. He just came along with them and enjoyed himself, and was glad of Bruce's good fortune, and never worried.

Ashamed of his thoughts of their trio's danger, he went through into the other room. "You chaps awake ?" he said.

There was a stirring in the twin beds, and the Mouse said, "Hullo, what's up ?"

"Oh, nothing. I can't go to sleep. I say . . ."

Peter sat up sleepily. "What do you say, Bruce ?"

"I say, it wasn't bad, was it ?"

"It was topping ; a bloody good end-up to our school-days together," Peter said sentimentally.

"Hell, yes. But you fellows . . ." He wanted to say something. "We've been knocking about together for a devil of a time. We mustn't let this break things up. . . ."

"Good God, no !" said Peter. "Why should it ?"

"Sort of thing's supposed to," said Bruce.

"Well, it won't with us," said the Mouse briefly.

"All right. Sorry to have disturbed you. Good night." He saw that Peter had held out his hand. He took it, then, moved by a sudden impulse, he leaned over and clumsily kissed his fat cheek, then ran back, rather confused, to bed.

CHAPTER XIII

MARY

NEXT—a retreat, thought Mary. A home on a hill, some beautiful old house with flowers round it and ancient trees, and a view unspoilt from its windows, to which she could call Bruce from the smoke of Smetham. Some place where she could have him to herself for a while, where he would be happy. It must be in coloured contrast to his drear English years, so that he would feel in coming to her that he was walking straight into the spring.

They spent several days looking at houses before they found Silliwake. To the young men deputed by house-agents to show them round various places, Mary must have seemed a taut and exigent woman, as she walked briskly from room to room, her small, newly beringed fingers holding a cigarette. With the keen coercion of wealthy middle-age no longer blinded by impulses, she would make them show her each aspect of a house in infinite detail before she made up her mind. This she would do quite definitely at last, when she found that something she demanded of a home—a tennis-court, sufficient out-houses, enough rooms—was lacking.

Tito remained unperturbed by her fastidiousness. Puffing at his cigar with amusement he would lean back in the car as they drove out of the gates, a little proud, perhaps, that she was so hard to please. He was perfectly aware that it was for Bruce that she demanded so much, but was not worried by the fact.

And Mary meant, quite definitely meant, not to be put off with anything but a home which she considered worthy of this future. She was paying, and for Tito's

sake she refused to remember how dearly, for the privilege of having what money could secure, and for Bruce she intended to have it.

But she was satisfied at last. Silliwake stood half a mile from the road, up a long elm drive of its own. When the car stopped at the point from which it was first visible, Mary exclaimed: "Oh, Tito—I believe I've found it!" An old, red-brick house matured to the colour of autumn leaves, and built in the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth, it looked across the garden from mullioned windows. It was large but nowhere solid, with gables and courts, with abutting wings built perhaps a decade after the rest of the house, and giving it a quality of mystery as though it could never be quite explored. The windows were countless, set in masonry and leaded. The tall, finely shaped chimney-pots seemed to spire out of the roofs into a sky which, that April day, tinged them with gold, and gave the whole house the dreamy uncertainty of a building on a hill, seen from afar.

Elderly trees watched round it—a giant cedar, an overgrown mulberry, chestnuts—not enough to darken the windows, but protective and shady. There were daffodils alight in the garden, and out of the unblemished grass a herd of crocuses craned their necks.

"It's very beautiful," said Tito; then mischievously: "And room for a sports field!"

Mary seemed not to have heard him. She was looking at the bricky, step-like edge to one gable, with ivy straining up to it, her eye running down to the long wall which protected a side of the garden. It was the unreality of the house that attracted her, its uneven outlines and scattered shape.

"Let's go in," she said, almost under her breath, without turning to Tito.

He nodded, getting carefully from the car.

The interior held no disappointments. A central hall, oak-panelled and having one wall almost occupied by an immense open fireplace, a bright dining-room, rooms that led one from another bewilderingly, a medley of kitchen

quarters with vast white sculleries and dairies—it was as Mary had imagined. But what finally decided her was a remark of the agent's: "And the top floor," he said, "has been divided by the last tenant to make a flat of its own, private from the rest of the house."

Eagerly Mary examined it. Then she turned to Tito. "I have made up my mind," she said. "This is what I want." And she left him to buy the place.

In a week it was furnished. Tito was by now a trifle impatient and went straight to a West End firm and told them to "furnish it entirely in period" and "send him the bill". The big, artistic-fingered Jew to whom he spoke took notes on the matter as though he were accustomed to receiving orders of this sort every day, and nodded astutely when Tito said he would give him seven days.

"No fakes, you understand," said Tito.

"Certainly not, sir."

"The *señora* will discuss colours with you."

But the *señora* was at the top of the house. She saw exactly how Bruce's flat must be arranged. With the big bathroom she was satisfied, except that she would have a few more appliances round the bath, astonishing sprays and quicker taps. There was a long, higher-roofed room under the rafters, and this must be a gymnasium, but should have a piano in it, for, if he never learnt to play himself, he could have friends, dances perhaps . . . on his own. Then the little sitting-room—buff walls, she decided, and all round, to the height of four feet, natural-oak bookshelves, plain cherry-coloured curtains, a few water-colours, easy-chairs, a thick carpet, an oak refectory table as desk, made to match his bookshelves (Heal's should do the two), and the rest left to him. His bedroom should follow the same scheme. It would all be light and airy, yet cosy and inviting.

She took a strange and painful pleasure in the fact that she was giving him this seclusion, even from herself. She knew instinctively that this was the way really to keep him nearest to her. But she knew that she was

laying herself open to the possibility of being jealous of his solitude if he stayed away too long from her.

Her ingenuity did not, however, stop at the preparation of his rooms. She had sent a tailor down to Greycaster to measure him, and afterwards to fit him, bearing with him on the first visit a selection of cloths. Mary had herself endorsed Bruce's choice, which had evidently been made when Eileen was not present. And soon, up in his bedroom, was the result—a row of waiting suits. For Bruce, she knew, had an almost feminine love for clothes learned long ago in the South, and cramped by Eileen's homespun taste. Moreover, there was a consignment of tempting et ceteras—shirts and ties and such less staple garments—from which he could select. Mary knew that in the matter of arranging their new life these things were far from trivial, and she took a wilful pleasure in not forgetting any of them.

When she had first seen them displayed in his bedroom she had grown a little wistful. They, after all, seemed to represent what she could do for him now. In their skeleton row, greys and blues and browns, the empty suits were somehow symbolic. Easily ordered and bought, they were the substitute for the hardly won presents she had made him in Smetham . . . they seemed soulless suddenly—pathetic in their dignified array. He would love them, of course, but such trivial things they seemed, to have cost her so much. . . . Oh, well, she must not be morbid now . . . they were only a few suits. . . .

She decided, too, that Bruce should have a manservant of his own to look after his little flat. She suggested it to Tito, who laughed. "Why not?" he said. "And why ask me? You know perfectly well that if you destined me to play the part you would have me doing it in six hours!"

She kissed his brown forehead lightly. "I thought perhaps that Emilio . . ." she began cooingly.

"My dear . . . my chauffeur! The only man I've ever got to drive the car decently!"

"Is he?" said Mary, from a distance. "But you

see, Tito, he's Argentine and it would be so good for Bruce to practise his Spanish. Besides, he looks such a nice obliging boy. I'm sure it would be an excellent plan."

Tito feigned immense concern. "What is to be left of me I wonder, when Bruce is catered for? Would you like me to give him the car as well?"

"Oh no," said Mary quietly. "Not that one. It's far too conspicuous. But of course Bruce will need a car later."

Tito burst into one of his great chesty laughs, and kissed her. "I expect he'll get it," he said. "Meanwhile, what am I going to do for a chauffeur?"

"Oh, they're far easier to get than reliable valets. We'll soon arrange that."

Mary decided to defer the more substantial question of a tutor for a time—Bruce would need a holiday after Greycaster. And she would leave the other things, which she had already half planned, till he had settled down, and she knew what he wanted. So she felt at last that she had matters sufficiently prepared, and wrote to him and Eileen. She would expect him on the Friday. He was preceded by a letter from her sister.

176 Burnley Road,
Smetham.
April 18th, 1928.

My Dear Mary,

Robert and I were naturally very shocked to hear of the step you have taken. We feel that you cannot realize the rashness of a hasty wedding of this sort with a foreigner. Besides, it was not kind of you to send word by a lawyer instead of letting us know, or bringing the man here to meet us. I understand that he is very wealthy, and after the interest we have taken in Bruce we are sorry to know this, as there is nothing worse for a young boy than to see extravagance about him. However, I have told Bruce that if ever he should need it there is a place for him in this house. As your sister, I am not above wishing you happiness, but I cannot

feel happy about you myself. You were always one for doing funny things. Bruce will come on Friday, and I understand that there is a motor-car coming to fetch him. I have packed his woollen underclothes in the lid of his trunk. He ought not to be without these in this changeable weather. The suits he has chosen seemed rather showy to us, but we don't profess to be up-to-date *people. Well, Mary, I must close now, and I shall pray that the future may not hold unhappiness for you.*

Your affectionate sister,
Eileen.

P.S.—Is your husband an R.C.? Bruce has always refused to come to church with us, but we should not like to think of him being led into anything of that sort.

Mary folded the letter absently. Poor Eileen. How painfully well she meant. But it was a good thing that Bruce was coming away from there at last.

On the afternoon when he was to arrive, Mary sat up in her own little room over the front door, ready to watch from the window when the time for the car's return approached. It was just such a day as she wanted for his coming, sunny and still and clear, so that beneath her the spring flowers were motionless. And he was to come straight from that Smetham street into this garden. He would get into the car outside the cankered walls of grey houses, and step from it to this placid home. It was what she had always wanted to do for him.

Mary hummed. She was almost happy now. Soon he would be here. . . .

Tito was in town and would not be home till dinner-time. She was glad that she would greet Bruce alone. She wanted him and Tito to get on well together, but just this first afternoon . . . a cosy tea together by the big fire in the hall . . . confidences . . . He would ask her about Tito. Not directly of course, but with his eyes. Well, she could tell him that she was happy with Tito. And she was in a way. He had not jarred her solitude nearly so much as she anticipated.

Yes, even for herself, so far as she could think of herself apart from Bruce, Mary was glad that she had married him. He was a good man, and in his raw, sentimental way he loved her. At least he had chosen her from—she did not care to think how many—other women to be his wife. He would not be faithful to her of course; at least not literally. But "in his fashion" —yes. Always. There would never be "scenes" between them about that. To Mary the dramatic moment in which a wife finds in her husband's pocket another woman's love-letters was absurdly unreal. Marriage had never meant that to her. She had never even bothered to wonder if Geoffrey had slept with other women in Buenos Aires. She hoped he had, poor Geoffrey, hoped that life had given him something before it sent him to a brutal death. And if Tito wanted to take someone he had found in London away for the week-end she would not care. Or almost not at all. He would never insult her by telling her in that stagey English way that "he loved someone else".

That was what she liked about Latins. They kept their balance over sex. When they married, they married for good. They did not get melodramatic every time they met someone afterwards with whom they wanted to spend a few nights. They just went away decently and quietly, and came back afterwards with a smacking kiss for the *señora* and the kids. Far the best way, and saved all these silly situations that you read about in England. . . . For her, at least, it was ideal. For what had marriage ever been, what could it ever be for her, since the bleak, yellow disillusionment of her first days with Geoffrey?

Yes, Tito's moral code suited her admirably. She had made a pact with him, and both were doing their parts. And it was succeeding. Take it all round—and Mary sighed—take it all round it was an excellent arrangement, since she had nearly reached forty and long since left her first illusions behind.

It was time for the car now. She crossed to the window—no sign yet. Beyond the grounds she could see over an expanse of level Kent, quiet, cattle-strewn,

marshy ground between Silliwake and the river. There were woods over to the left . . . shooting, the agent had told her. . . . Suddenly she saw the car take the bend. She went downstairs.

He was there—he was there indeed. He sprang from the car before it had stopped, leaving its door to sway behind him, and ran forward to her, his eyes laughing, his arms about her in a moment.

"Mother—darling!"

Mary kissed his cheek and held him a moment, only a moment, then stood watching him run excitedly back for his suit-case. He seemed nonplussed to see it already handed out by the chauffeur and carried solemnly into the house. But in a second he was with her again, pulling her out on to the lawn to gaze up laughing at the house.

"What a marvellous old place!"

"Like it?"

"Rather. However did you find it? You can't see how it's built—all those funny corners. And the garden!"

He kissed her again. "You don't know how lovely it seems after Smetham!"

She walked towards the front door. He was talking volubly. "Of course I was fearfully excited when I heard the news. And Uncle Tito! That's what was so thrilling. You never even told me he was in England. You sly old mother! Of course I've known all about it for years."

"Have you, Bruce?"

"Why, yes. Ever since San Isidro. He and you have always been in love, haven't you?"

"I suppose so," said Mary. This was easier than she had expected.

"It's ripping. I'd rather it were he than anyone. He was such a sport, always. Is he indoors now? I'm dying to see him again!"

"No. He'll be home to dinner."

"God, what a gorgeous room! Darling! I'm so excited. And it's our home! Are Julio and Lindita here?"

"No, they'll be over in about a month. Tito cabled."

"That'll be fine. I wonder what they're like now. I feel as though all that Smetham business had never happened. Can't we look round the house? Where's my room?"

"Would you like to see it now, or after tea?"

"Now. Now. Let's see all over it!" He pulled her impetuously out of her chair by both hands. "Mater —I'm *so* happy! To think that we're really together again. No Aunt Eileen to be polite to!"

She felt herself dragged by the arm. "This way," she said, and began showing him the rooms downstairs to an accompaniment of his exuberant adjectives. When at last they reached the end of the second floor she led him to the little oak door which divided the staircase of his own flat from the rest.

"Is this my room at last?" said Bruce.

"Wait and see," smiled Mary, and rang an electric bell. The door was opened by Emilio. "He's going to look after you," said Mary. "I thought it would be nice for you to have someone for your clothes and to keep your place in order. He's Argentine, doesn't speak English."

"Ah—*buenas dias, señor,*" said Emilio with a quick smile.

"*Buenas dias,*" said Bruce, not quite understanding.

"You see, this part of the house is to be completely yours, and none of the other servants need come up here then."

"All this—mine?" They were on the landing now.

"There are just three rooms and a bathroom. This big one I thought would make a sort of studio-gymnasium. . . ."

"Oh . . ." He was across the floor, shadow-boxing wildly, flushed with pleasure. "Oh—how perfect!"

She watched him quietly. This is what she was paying for . . . this . . . this. . . . To see him tear about the room with enthusiasm, to have him dancing back to kiss her . . . she was content.

"Quick—quick! The rest!" cried Bruce, and she took him to his sitting-room. "Heavenly," he pronounced.

"You'll have to get books for those shelves," said Mary, much as she might have said he would need a frame for that picture.

"Rather—and what a view!"

Last his bedroom, which earned another exuberant hug. "It's all beyond everything I ever imagined," said Bruce. Then he saw the suits. He was nearly girlish. "Mother, Mother—look at them. Oh, my God!"

Mary was quick. "Would you like to change?" she said.

"Yes—and I'll come down to tea. Which shall I put on?"

"Whichever you like."

"But I can't decide!" cried Bruce. "They're fascinating. All right. I'll be down in a moment."

Mary left him with Emilio, and descended slowly to the lounge, where tea was laid out. How he had loved it all! He said it was beyond his hopes. He had been beyond hers. So excited. So *thrilled*. . . . Soon he came into the room, resplendent in a brawny buff-coloured plus-four suit, with checked stockings and a wild tie. His hair, Mary thought, had grown smoother since they had been in England, as though Smetham had disciplined it about his head. But he kept that quality almost of savagery, so turbulent his eyes and restless. He ate heartily. Cream and jam, cakes and crumpets—enjoyed it all, talking with his mouth full. Then, when he had finished and lit a cigarette, Mary saw him turn to her as though in afterthought. "And you, Mater," he said—"you're happy too?"

"Yes, Bruce," she told him, "I'm happy too."

CHAPTER XIV

BRUCE

It may have been significant that Bruce was given a car before he had a tutor. He had a birthday about a month after he came to Silliwake, and Tito, infected perhaps with the general dangerous atmosphere of devotion to his stepson, himself took him down to the garage after breakfast. "Something to show you," he remarked.

Bruce, accustomed now to his new life, but still adventurously happy in it, followed, and waited with Tito while the doors were pushed aside. "Eighteen, aren't you?" said Tito. "Don't light candles round the damn' thing!" It was a Bentley Six, long, black, powerful, seeming to be waiting for motion like an engine under steam and ready to rush out of a station. Even in the half darkness of the garage it gleamed convincingly.

It was for Bruce the crowning satisfaction. At school he had shared with most boys their prime ambition—the possession of a motor-bike. Tito was like the Djinn in the fairy-story, waving before his eyes the accomplishment of his highest hopes. Usually effusive enough, Bruce found himself now quite at a loss. "How am I to thank you?" he gasped. "You're ripping to me, Uncle Tito! It's . . . It's . . . I'd have chosen it from all other cars. . . ."

"Well, don't kill yourself in it," said Tito. "I should have the devil to pay with your mother!" He turned away, for Bruce was already in the driving-seat.

A few days later he was tearing up a wide arterial road from the coast, a vivid sunset in his eyes, and his mother beside him. In the Aladdin-like weeks since he had come

to Silliwake he had been almost incessantly with her, under the indulgent smile of Tito. And he had asked her, of course, to come for his "first real run" in the car. They had gone down in the morning to the sea, choosing an easy objective, and were hurrying back to dinner. At least—Bruce always hurried in the Bentley, but there was an excuse for it today.

"Tired?" he said, looking down for a moment at his mother's frail fur-wrapped person beside him.

"A little. You shouldn't drive so fast, Bruce. That little finger says more than seventy miles an hour. And you've only just learnt."

Bruce laughed. He liked her to pretend concern at his speed, liked the feeling of power it gave him. Effortlessly the long two-seater glided up a low-backed hill, without seeming conscious of it. They shot over a cross-roads where an A.A. official waved them on and saluted, and Bruce raised a fur-gloved hand gaily. "You don't mind," he said. "You know I'm safe."

"Well, yes. But you shouldn't take risks."

"Darling—I don't. It's as safe to go like this on an open road as it is to crawl. Get into the side of the road, you blighter!" This to the driver of a rather tired-looking Talbot, who had made Bruce go far out of his way. "Goes well, doesn't she?" he asked for the fifth time that day.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see his mother smile.

"It seems to go very well," she said.

"Warm enough?"

"Yes, thanks, dear."

"Soon be home."

"Yes."

"I've enjoyed today."

"So have I."

The sunset was beginning to grow purple, and would soon be gone, leaving them to cover the rest of the way with head-lights. But Bruce was glad. He had not yet used his lights,

"If you knew how I've wanted a car! Never dreamt I should be able to get one till I was about thirty though."

"Didn't you?"

"Well, you know I didn't. Mouse used to pull my leg about cars. I remember him saying, in his funny thoughtful way, that I was, after all, the ordinary English schoolboy carried to the *n*th degree, whatever he meant by that. Of course the Mouse is brainy."

"I suppose he is. I like Peter better."

"Oh, well, Peter, yes. Peter's an awfully good sort. But the Mouse is cleverer. He understands. He said, another time, that I was born for a private income." Bruce laughed. "But that was rot because I want to get somewhere off my own bat . . . you know what I mean . . . it's awfully decent to have Uncle Tito and you behind me . . . but I want to make a success of some sort, myself."

"What sort?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't mind being an engineer."

"You'll have to think about it."

"I say, do you think we need lights on? It's getting dark."

"Well, none of the other cars seem to have them yet."

"No."

"How far are we from home now?"

"Ten miles, I should think. She's come up rippingly from the coast. I expect she's a bit splashed though. I'll tell them to wash her down before tomorrow."

"Where are you going tomorrow?"

"Darling, have you forgotten?"

"Of course not. I was surprised that you had remembered."

"Mater—as if I should forget! Juiio and Lindita!"

"What time will you start?"

"Oh, quite early. I want to be at Southampton in plenty of time. I'm dying to see them again. It will be like San Isidro, won't it? The three of us together! We'll have marvellous times."

"You must remember they'll be much older. Julio's nineteen now and Lindita fifteen."

"I know. All the more fun. We shall be just like we were as kids. And you . . . and Uncle Tito. . . . I must slow down here. We're going through Maidstone."

He was not tired when they came up the long drive to Silliwake, Bruce's lights—switched on at last—whitening the elms each side of them. But he felt a vague satisfaction in having brought his cargo safely home at such speed. He took his mother to the front entrance, and she stepped lightly out. He watched her as she fluttered quickly up to the door.

"How young you look, Mater!" he called above the low noise of the engine.

"What did you say, Bruce?" She had taken a step back to hear him.

He leaned from the car. "I said how young you looked!"

"You go and put your car away; you'll be late for dinner."

He swung the great black droning thing round with a swift chanciness, missing the grass border, and set out for the garage. He could scarcely bear to leave it to the chauffeur. "Get that mud off her, will you?" he said. "I've got to be off early tomorrow!"

Then he ran up to his room to change for dinner. He paused, looking into the fire that was glowing there. What days! What days! His little mother beside him —and all the wishes of his heart. He had no sense of precariousness where this happiness was concerned. It was as solid as Tito. And for ever he would be content now—nothing could happen to disrupt this inner warmth, this sense of substantial gaiety. The past had fallen away. Greycaster was an ugly cloud he had come through. Groom and Eileen and Robert—figures in a mist. He looked round his room and felt himself a cheerful lordling —with a noisy, exciting, promising world ahead to call him out for magnificently victorious struggles. . . .

Next morning he was up before sunlight had done

more than timorously peer across the lawn. He was to meet Julio and Lindita . . . to have them for friends again. . . . He stood leaning out of his sitting-room window, watching Tito's chauffeur starting his car. "Another gorgeous morning," he sighed gratefully, and pushed open the window. The still air, scentless yet, was perceptible about him, and sent him across the room for a dressing-gown, but he returned to his place overlooking the garden. He remembered the tired staleness of early mornings in Burnley Road, when the street wore an air of having been left out all night, and waste paper was being hustled down its gutters by the wind. But this garden was new for the new day, as though, since he had come in from it yesterday, mysterious hands had been at work freshening it, preparing it for the sun, setting sparrows free to chirp about the house, and the first of the year's swallows over the stables. . . .

With an unconscious gesture, half because he was cold, Bruce hugged his own ribs. One of his eternal adjectives slipped out: "Lovely!" he said to the cedar tree. . . .

Very faintly, because he was leaning so far out, he heard a tap at the door behind him. "Come in," he called, turning back to the room.

It was Emilio, grinning and talkative, with his breakfast. "*Pero*, Señor Bruce," he began in Spanish, "you will catch cold," and he officiously—as though with fervent solicitude—bustled past him to close the window.

"Rubbish," said Bruce, inquisitively looking under the covers of dishes. "On a morning like this?"

Emilio got up his chair. "Shall I light a fire?" he asked.

"No. It's warm. Oh, look here, Emilio. I'm going down to meet Señor Julio and the *señorita*."

Emilio smiled. "I know, sir. I saw them in Buenos Aires a few months ago. Señor Julio is a young devil, you know, sir." This was the extreme of flattery. "Not a girl in the place but fell for him."

Bruce was thoughtful. Every now and again in this new existence, cropped up something like Emilio's remark,

which made him feel that his own life was incomplete. The lip-licking way in which Emilio spoke his appreciation of Julio's success among girls made Bruce almost jealous. "Pity I'm not so clever," he said.

Emilio was no fool. "But, *señor*," he said quickly, "it is not that. You could cut him out quickly enough. Only you do not give yourself a chance. You have not taken an interest in young ladies." He spoke as though it were a matter for considerable regret among them.

Bruce, his mouth full of bacon and kidney, said, "How do you know?"

"I have not seen it, sir. Perhaps you have already a heart engaged."

"Perhaps," said Bruce, for the moment wishing he could substantiate this flattering suggestion.

"What suit will you wear?" asked Emilio.

"I don't know. Remember I'm going to meet a *señorita* today."

That seemed to be a great joke to the alert little dark man. "Then it must be the one I shall set out for you," he smirked.

Half an hour later Bruce tapped at his mother's door. He always came into her primrose-coloured bedroom in the morning to kiss her and tell her his plans. She was not yet up, and he sat on the bed. "I don't know when I shall be back," he said. "You know how long one has to wait."

"Yes. Drive carefully, Bruce."

"Don't worry about that!" he laughed. "I'll bring them back all right."

He lit a cigarette for her and left her. Then off downstairs, a slam of the front door, and his grey flannel trousers were flapping about his ankles as he ran round to the garage. In a few moments he was low in the cushioned seat. He felt the mechanical power of the car cringing at the foot which was on the accelerator, and started on his way to Southampton.

When he first caught sight of Lindita she was high up the black cliff of the liner. She was leaning over the

rail, and when she saw him she waved, not excitedly, just with quick grace and composure, as his mother might have done. He could not see her face clearly, but knew beyond question that it was she. She wore, he could see, a brilliant little lemon-coloured cape about her shoulders, and somewhere in her black hat was a streak of silver. She looked delicate and elegant up there, and when she spread caped arms along the rails it was as though a saffron butterfly had perched on them.

Presently Julio joined her, and tried to shout down to him—but he could not hear. Julio looked like a man well over twenty, almost like a slim Tito beside his sister. Through the seemingly endless time before the passengers were allowed ashore they intermittently signalled to each other.

When at last the two came slowly down the gangway, Bruce was keenly excited. The pause had given him time to become nervous and expectant. On the quay, Julio turned aside to say good-bye to some English girl; Bruce saw doubtful pleasure in her face—the expression of a thoroughly well-brought-up young lady with whom an attractive but obviously unsuitable Latin has become acquainted. Then he found Lindita beside him.

He was at once spellbound. She was without shyness; she was unmistakably a grown woman in everything but years; she was, he thought, the most divinely pretty creature he had ever seen. Two years ago he had left her a lanky schoolgirl with loose hair—she was now a pert but imperturbable princess. She gave him her hand like a favour.

"Lindita!"

"Bruce—*amigo*! *Tanto tiempo!*"

"But this is . . ."

"Julio's just coming. He's seeing the last of one of his flirtations," she said in Spanish with a pouting smile.

"Oh—does he flirt, then?" The fatuous question was all he could select from a hundred possible remarks.

"Always. Don't you?"

He remembered how as children she remained rather

aloof in conversation, and felt now bewildered by this beginning. He had begun to feel himself in these months such a little man of the world, so at home in the atmosphere of Silliwake, that he was annoyed at being made to feel *gauche* and at a loss by this child.

"I . . . you shall see!" he returned gaily. Which was by way of a retort.

Julio came up. *"Bruçito! Amigo de mi alma! Tanto tiempo! Qué tal?"* He was letting off greetings, smiling, jerking Bruce's arm up and down while his left hand pawed his shoulder. "Did you see my *inglesita*?" he asked before Bruce had time to answer. *"Es una papa, no es asi?"*

Bruce glanced back and nodded. But again Julio was volleying out laughing questions. "And your mother? And the old man? Married now, eh? All one family?" He took Bruce's arm and his sister's.

Lindita disengaged herself. "You must see to the luggage, Julio."

"Luggage? *Caramba!* Yes. We must get through your customs, Bruce. Come along. I thought it was always foggy in England? There's sunlight today. Hey, *portero*! Tell him to bring those bags through here, Bruce. I can't talk this lingo of yours. Are we going by train?"

"No. I've got a car."

"That's good."

Bruce was disappointed that they did not even ask what make, and felt again a sense of provincialism beside these two.

When at last they had sent on by train a stack of trunks, and got some suit-cases on the Bentley, he put them in beside him—Lindita in the middle—and began the slow journey from the docks to the open road. All the time Julio was leaning across his sister asking questions and not waiting for answers.

"What's England like?" he said. "Are the girls pretty?"

"They're nearly all blonde," laughed Bruce, with a side-glance at Lindita's almost black short hair.

"That's what I like," shouted Julio. "Give me a nice *rubia*, and I shall be happy. This is a good road, not like ours, is it ? How far away do we live ?"

"About three hours," said Bruce, shaking off the last of the town traffic with a burst of risky speed, and breasting a long hill.

Lindita had turned to look back. "Stop !" she said suddenly. "Oh, I must look at that !"

Imperious little creature, thought Bruce, drawing in as soon as his speed would let him so that she could look back over the town and the sea. She was enthralled, but she did not gush. Bruce remembered the eternal levels of Argentina, and knew that she had never seen the "view" of a town except from a tall building, or in the mountains. "I think," she announced quietly after she had taken it in, "I think I am going to like this England."

"I'm sure you are," said Bruce, turning again to the wheel. "It's a wonderful country."

"You always said so," burst out Julio. "You remember how we used to pull your leg ? You were going to be 'a soldier brave and fight for your native land'," he quoted a Spanish song.

"Was I ?" said Bruce. "I suppose that was when my father was killed."

Julio, with just such a quick turn to solemnity which makes all conversation appropriate among his people, said : "Oh yes. I remember. How proud you were of him, *Bruçito*."

"I am still," said Bruce.

Lindita seemed suddenly to become aware of the conversation. "And no wonder," she said, making Bruce turn to her with gratitude.

"And your mother," went on Julio, for it is not embarrassing to talk of one's mother in Spanish. "We all loved your mother."

"*Es una madonna*," said Bruce quickly.

"She is. She was adorable. And how she loved you —you wretched boy," said Julio, stretching his arm

behind Lindita to pat Bruce's shoulder fondly. "Like a Virgin and Child you used to look together."

Bruce felt happily at ease with them, speaking their lovely tongue, and talking in their own unaffected way of things that would make him blush with Peter and the Mouse. "Yes," he said, "I was fortunate in my father and mother. My father was a hero . . . and my mother the most divine lady. And"—he smiled to Lindita—"she has married the nicest man I know."

"Hooray!" said Julio, at that speech, and they all laughed, and sent the conversation spinning off somewhere else.

CHAPTER XV

MARY

It was the last Saturday in May, and warm enough to bask in the garden. Mary sat deeply cushioned under the cedar tree, intermittently watching a four of tennis on the court twenty yards away. The garden smelt of an English summer—wallflowers and forget-me-nots and the earlier herbaceous plants towards the house. It was so still that a bee on the bed beside her droned heavily, a low accompaniment to the bird-song. Early English summer indeed—fresh and pale gold, with white tennis-players and a lawn-mower humming farther away.

Mary was not alone. At her feet, in an attitude of as much abandonment as was consistent with creased trousers, reclined Mr. Edgar Ffoffell, the tutor she had recently engaged for Bruce. She had had some difficulty in selecting a man she thought capable, but Mr. Ffoffell had a brilliant academic record besides having been English tutor in a small European court, so that he had seemed to be best qualified. He was a fluty young man whose hair reminded her, as she looked down on it that afternoon, of the lawn which one of the gardeners had just cut—so regular and gentle were its undulations. He had a somewhat long face and white, thin neck, a heavy glint of gold among his teeth, and large tuberculous inquisitive eyes.

Mary knew that the young people did not like him. Bruce called him "soppy", but admitted that he taught well; Lindita stared at him occasionally in a cold, impersonal way, but never spoke to him if she could help it; Julio frankly called him rude names. But Mr. Ffoffell seemed unaware of this. When he was with Mary he was always ready to talk at great length about her son.

Mary knew that she was being rather weak to be flattered thus, even to let him pander to her as he did. But sometimes, on such a lazy afternoon as this, she did not prevent him from chatting on. He was clever enough to cover his remarks with a certain amount of pseudo-academic intricacy, so that Mary did not feel too obviously gratified. Sometimes she had a sudden elfish impulse to box the young man's pink ears and send him about his business, but on the whole, with the sunlight to soothe her and tennis to watch, his monologue was not disturbing.

The tennis was pretty fast—a men's four. Peter and the Mouse were spending a short week-end with Bruce, and were playing Bruce and Julio. "This is England versus Argentina," Bruce had turned to explain to her before the game began. On the farther side of the court Lindita sat watching, her racquet across her knee, and oblivious of any balls which left the court.

"Bruce *does* play a good game," said Mr. Ffoffell enthusiastically after Bruce had served an impetuous double fault. "Such grace! Such force!" He made an expressive fluttering curve in the air with his arm, in imitation of Bruce's service.

Mary nodded. "Yes," she said. "He's pretty strong."

"Oh, very," said Mr. Ffoffell—"very strong indeed. He should have great athletic success up at Oxford. Of course I know very little about that side of University life. Rather *ingenu* for me, I'm afraid. But Bruce will enjoy it. He's like that, one feels."

"Like what?" asked Mary.

"Oh, games you know, and so on. *Vi et armis*, if you can possibly see what I mean. What T. S. Eliot calls 'behaving as the wind behaves'. Bruce is so indefectibly *adolescent*, if I may say so. He'll just revel in laurel crowns. I quite envy his vigour!"

"You think he's a real Philistine, then?" said Mary.

Mr. Ffoffell seemed to consider this mutely, his head on one side and a moue on his lips. "Oh, hardly that, Señora de Montéz" (he mouthed her whole name pleasurably). "Just full of animal spirits, you know. *Le cygne*

noir, and all that. He makes me feel *passé*!" Mr. Floffell sighed poetically.

Mary said nothing. Mr. Ffoffell after a while continued: "Of course there are those undiscerning—really rather *borné*—people who would see him as a quite usual boy. His interests, you know, a car and sport. But there is something about him 'so very extra', as Gertrude Stein says. Even his conventional outlook is charged with a *je-ne-sais-quoi* of his own, I feel. Perhaps I'm not clear?"

Mary was getting a little tired of it. "I see what you mean," she said.

"One doesn't find him intellectual, of course, but he has such grasp if you can conceivably imagine what I'm hinting at. Such sudden *éclat* when one thinks he is not following! And of course there is that ultra-Epstein, quite anaglyptic perfection of his physique——"

"Game!" shouted Peter raucously. "That's five-three! Pull your socks up, Bruce!"

"Who's winning?" called Mary.

"England, of course," laughed the Mouse.

Mary looked across to see an almost vicious hardness in Julio's face. "What a minute, *amiguitos*," he said. The game went on.

"One feels, of course, that his choice of young friends has been circumstantial," continued Mr. Ffoffell. "But that is not unusual. What I like *most* about him"—he turned suddenly to Mary and looked full into her face, his long neck strained from his pale-green collar—"is his almost medieval idealism, if you know what I am trying to suggest. . . ."

"I'm afraid I don't quite," sighed Mary.

"Oh—but it's too jubilantly obvious. You, Señora de Montéz, and the memory of his father. He is positively incandescent with those. You are his Joan of Arc, his Vierge Marie, his Godiva and Desdemona, don't you know. He absolutely worships you . . . I can see it in his eyes. And his father is a magnificent myth. It's wonderful to watch."

"Shall we have tea brought out here, do you think?"

Mr. Ffoffell was on his feet in a moment, carefully brushing small pieces of dried grass from himself. "Would you like me to go across and order it?" he asked solicitously. "It would be quite too sylvan under this tree. One would feel like Omar—of course, but not so *démodé*. I'll *run* across, shall I?"

"It would be awfully kind of you. I think we should all enjoy it."

Mr. Ffoffell did not run. He picked his way convolutionally to the house, smiling back at her. Mary watched him, amused. She supposed he was clever. She could not understand half he said—but she had always been a fool, never even as a girl able to take part in any but the most commonplace conversation, never really able to express even her most obvious feelings. She wondered if she were a fool in other ways. A fool to have married Tito, to have allowed her life to be dominated by Bruce, to have done all the insane things she had for him. For nearly twenty years she had battened on other people for his sake . . . one way or another . . . was that foolhardiness? She had used everyone—Tito, Geoffrey, Eileen, Robert, and Tito again—to get what she wanted for her son . . . but she had got it. . . .

She looked dreamily across to the tennis-court—the four of them too intent to speak, even to call the score more than quickly and occasionally—evidently the crisis of their set. She had got him this . . . just what he had this afternoon . . . all she could think of for him. . . . And what after all was it worth? The sort of gilded prostitution of her marriage?

For a moment she eyed Bruce almost impersonally . . . "a quite usual boy", Ffoffell had said that some people would think him. Right, of course, in a way. No genius . . . nothing world-shaking. Just immensely lovable. . . . And worth what she had done? Worth herself? Worth what she had secured from others for him?

"Game—and . . ." cried Peter.

Bruce and Julio had lost. "Thanks awfully," they were all saying to one another. Julio hated it. For a moment his lips were tight with mortification. Bruce was grinning.

Worth it ? There was a pigeon in the cedar. The sun was still high. Warm golden afternoon—and the five young people coming towards her happy and hungry. . . . Bruce first—coming to tell her about it. Julio already laughing again, speaking his broken English, Lindita apart . . . the two other boys a trifle shy now . . . but all of them so blatantly youthful and cheery. . . . Worth it ? Oh, of course. Don't be absurd. She had wanted this. It's exactly what she had schemed. . . .

Mr. Ffoffell was crossing from the house again, when the flannelled group was round Mary, Bruce and Julio talking at once.

"But we have return in a minute," said Julio.

"No, no," said Bruce. "Lindita must play now."

"I don't mind a bit," said Lindita, looking away.

"Well, you must all have some tea first," said Mary. "They'll bring it out here."

"That's good," said Bruce. "Sit down, everyone."

"You must get some chairs, Bruce."

The Mouse and Rix hastily dropping to the ground assured her that they preferred it. Bruce turned to Lindita. "I'll get you a chair," he said. "Just a moment."

"Bruce, my dear," said Mr. Ffoffell, when he had returned, "your tennis is quite too artful. I've been watching."

"Think so ?" said Bruce, trying to be gruff.

"Oh, but delicious—all four of you. You made a poem against that green bank. *Fête champêtre*, you know. I was in ecstasies, wasn't I, Señora de Montéz ?"

"You were," said Mary with only a tiny smile, and tea was brought.

Munching strawberries they chattered on. Mary watched their cups, and at intervals their faces. Bruce was trying to persuade Lindita to have cream.

"No," she said, "I like the fruit. That would spoil it."

"Oh, but it doesn't. You must eat them our way."

She took her head. "You can . . . and get fat," she said, giving him a rapid smile.

Peter turned to her, grinning. "Does it make you fat?" he asked.

Lindita's English was better than Julio's. "I think you have eaten much cream, Peter," she said.

Mr. Ffoffell was deep in conversation with the Mouse. Mary caught the name Cocteau. "Oh, but you must! Such *bas-profond* conclusiveness, you know. Right down beneath all ordinary emotion. Like living at the bottom of a green sea—with cold blood in the veins . . ." he gave a demonstrative shiver.

"Julio dear," called Mary. "More tea?"

He handed his cup. "Can't understand that fellow," he said confidentially in Spanish. "What's he talking about?"

"I never know," admitted Mary. "Books, I think."

Lindita was telling Peter Rix that he ought to go to her country. "You get married there, Peter. Many, many chances!"

"Would I? Would anyone have me?" smiled Peter.

"All have you. All the girls say which will have that fine fat Englishman Peter. All run after you."

"Don't you believe it, Peter," said Bruce. "They've got their sweethearts already there."

"Bruce dear," said Mary, "run indoors and get the cigarettes, will you? There's a box in the hall." Mary filled another cup and turned again to the Mouse.

"Corvo?" Mr. Ffoffell was saying. "*The* man, my dear. Esoteric, of course, not for literary gluttons, but for you and me . . . oh, entrancing. *Then* there's Ronald Firbank . . ."

It babbled on around her. Sometimes they tried to draw her in. Bruce, after he had handed round the cigarettes, turned to her with—"Mother, isn't the weather like this all through the summer in England? Lindita won't believe me . . ." And Mary had been amused and equivocal. Mostly they were too absorbed in

their own group. Tito presently strolled out of the front door and across to them. He had just come down from town and wore a stiff collar, but, used to warmer days, seemed quite comfortable. Mr. Ffoffell was moved to a gasp of admiration by Tito's wide and pronounced pin-stripe and old-gold tie. "*What clothes!*" he whispered to the Mouse, "but he carries them off. It's marvellous. I wish I had the *effrontery*!"

Tito beamed on them. "Tennis?" he said. "I shall come and beat you all!"

"Do, sir!" said Peter Rix. "Argentina needs some support."

"*Cállase, papa,*" said Julio. "You cannot hit the ball!"

They laughed and someone suggested starting again. The remark took sharp effect. Cigarette-ends were put aside, racquets seized, and the five of them went back towards the court.

Mr. Ffoffell was terrified of Tito, who had privately asked Julio if he were "all there", to which Julio had said disgustedly, "I suppose so—above the waist." Tito himself could scarcely be civil to the tutor. So that as soon as the Argentine had dropped his bulk into the deck-chair beside Mary, Ffoffell rose. "If you will excuse me," he said, "I'll wander over and talk to the non-combatant." He indicated his victim, who happened to be Peter Rix, sitting out of a game. "It would cheer him up, I'm sure," he added, and finding no answering smile on Tito's face, minced tartly off.

Tito blew his nose. "Scent!" he said, snorting. "What makes you have that thing about here, Mary?"

"He's a good coach, dear. Bruce has his examination in a month's time."

"But is it necessary that he should learn from someone who walks like a pigeon? As if I didn't see enough of his type in London. The place is full of them!"

"Tito!" blazed Mary. "I won't have you saying things like that about my country. It's not! Mr. Ffoffell is extremely clever. And you can't understand

artistic people. They're not crude. Besides, what about all the dressed-up young men in Buenos Aires?"

"There's a difference," said Tito.

"Yes. They can't behave themselves. Laughing at girls in the streets! They even pinch them as they go by! Disgusting!"

"Well," said Tito, amused, "I'm sure no one would accuse your tutor of pinching girls in the streets."

"No. He's too much of a gentleman. I think you're horrid to say things like that about London. You're always trying to run down everything English!"

"Dolorosita! You must not be unjust. You know I don't do that. I love everything English, particularly my wife. Now smooth out that little frown."

But Mary was angry. "I *like* Mr. Ffoffell," she said bravely.

"No doubt he's charming," said Tito. "Only I'm too coarse to appreciate him," and he laughed again. Presently he said, "Lindita plays a good game, doesn't she?"

"Yes," said Mary rather snappily. It was not the moment to remind her of their daughter.

"She's going to be a beautiful woman, Dolorosa. She will justify you for once loving a great bounding brute of an Argentine!"

"Oh, don't be sentimental, Tito." Mary was tired.

"Is that sentimental? I am sorry. All the same I like to see our children together. They're fine children, all of them. Good friends, too." Tito smiled with satisfaction.

Mary frowned. "It's all right for this summer while Lindita is so young," she said. "But I think you know it would be best for her to finish her education in Buenos Aires."

Mary expected him to bridle at that. In the hurried arrangements for their wedding no very definite plans had been made for the children, and she was not certain how Tito would accept such a suggestion. But he nodded. "I agree," he said. "Perhaps I shall take her back this winter. She has her relations there. And I could join

you again in the English spring. Unless you would come. . . ."

"I couldn't be away at Christmas-time," said Mary.

Tito sighed. "We are growing old, Dolorosa. Old and parental. Letting our children arrange our lives. Well—as you say, we mustn't leave the three together too long. I have wondered sometimes if Julio guesses the truth. . . ."

"Julio?"

"He once asked me about his mother. I don't know. There were papers in my desk which showed the date on which she went into the Home. Of course they were always locked up. But we want no complications, Mary. . . ."

Mary's heart was thumping, and she felt the curious nervy giddiness which follows a shock. Complications—no. If anything, anything even like a suspicion entered Bruce's mind it would have hideous consequences. Her boy to dream for a moment that his father and mother had not been ideally married, to guess . . . "Tito," she said, "do you think . . ."

"My dear, no. No danger. Don't worry, Mary. They shall never have the least idea. Why should they? They are just three children, fine children. . . ."

Slightly pacified by the blandness in his voice, Mary leaned back in her chair again. But his remarks had broken into her peace of mind. It was as though he had made her aware of the precariousness of this content. It seemed, as she watched the children through half-closed eyes, to tremble near a black and magnetic destruction. That afternoon she had complacently reviewed the things she had won for Bruce, reviewed them as though they were safely in his hands for ever. But this was a new foreboding. Suppose . . . suppose in some way he learned the truth about herself and Geoffrey . . . all his silly idealism would smash up as though a shell had struck it . . . and with it their love. With it their love and all she cared for this side of death . . . all she had ever lived for. . . .

Silliwake itself, dreaming in the gilded peace of the early evening, seemed less real to her . . . the children were "little victims" under a quickly setting sun. She knew in her heart that henceforward she could never again so easily bask in the peace of her achievement. She would be watchful once more . . . ready to guard him, but now from wilier dangers, things harder to combat which might spring from any circumstances as yet unguessed.

Her head ached. Tito had laid his hand on hers. "What's the matter, *carissima* ?"

"Nothing, Tito dear. Just . . . We must take care of them, that's all. . . ."

"Of course, of course . . ." he said placidly, patting her hand.

But this time Mary was uninfected by his security. She grew inwardly harder, inwardly felt a new determination. Bruce should never know. He should never have the least cause to suspect. Nothing should ever break the peace she had secured for him, or spoil the future she had planned. If she herself went mad in the desperate struggle with doubts, if she herself died protecting his foolish young dreams, it would not matter. But Bruce should have his life unclouded, his triumphant future ; his love-making should have no ugly precedents, his conception of her should remain a white dream. She would set herself resolutely between him and the whole sordidness of doubt and circumstance. His life would remain untainted.

Tito seemed unaware of the storm he had roused, unaware of her white face. He was watching the tennis. He would not care, thought Mary ; it would matter little to him. Lindita would be pleasantly awed by the thought of Mary as her own mother . . . already she called her "Mama", and in her reserved or diffident way showed a bird-like affection for her—sitting beside her sometimes when the boys were away, talking not bashfully but with her own sharpness, visiting her room to discuss clothes. Mary had done her best to encourage this . . . and knew that subconsciously Lindita had an instinctive sense of

their true relationship, unguessed by her thinking self. So that so far as his daughter was concerned Tito would have little cause to worry if there were a revelation. And Julio? Julio would probably slap his father on the back and laugh. . . .

No, it was Bruce who would suffer. Tito must realize the importance to Bruce. . . . "If ever," she said, "if ever my son got the least hint . . ."

Tito broke in. "Still worrying? Darling, think no more about it. There is no danger. It is foolish to think about it. Now what shall we discuss?"

Mary desisted, again somewhat appeased. Another set had finished and the players were strolling towards them, for the light was now failing. She rose smiling to welcome them. "You must all be tired," she said. "We'll go indoors for drinks."

As they crossed to the house Bruce came up to her. "Mater," he whispered, "you don't look very fit. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing—thanks, old chap. Just tired."

"Poor darling. Don't worry about all of us. I'll look after them. You go and lie down before dinner."

Mary shook her head, and they were the last to enter the lounge, to find Tito offering Mr. Ffoffell a whisky-and-soda.

"Oh . . . er . . . no thanks, Doctor," the tutor said. "I never . . . well, the merest hint of a cocktail. Thanks."

Mary was glad of her Martini. Again she retreated a little, watching them chattering near Tito while Julio vigorously shook the mixer for a second round. Presently Lindita crossed to her, carrying her own drink. "Tired?" she said.

"A little," said Mary. "How well you play! I believe you could beat the boys."

"Oh no," she said. Then suddenly, "I love it!"

"I'm sure you do. I was watching your service."

Bruce came over to them. "Isn't she a first-rate player?" he said, smiling proudly at Lindita.

"I have just been telling her so."

"Bruce is always trying to say nice things!" laughed Lindita.

The circle was gradually gathering about them. Ffoffell approached. "Something rejuvenating in the very colour of these!" he observed, holding up his cocktail. "And one feels among all this youth that one needs it," he smiled to Mary, including her in the youth.

The first gong for dinner freed Mary again, and she went up to her room. After she had taken some aspirin she sat down before the mirror. And for the first time in her life her almost unlined face seemed incongruous.

But after dinner Julio suggested dancing, and they went up to the big room in Bruce's flat. The lights had been shielded by silk blood-orange shades, and the floor polished. At once a fox-trot was put on the gramophone and Julio came up to her for the dance. Mary, watching Lindita dancing with Peter Rix, agreed, and her stepson led her into the middle of the room. When it was finished and they stood round dubiously (for there was no girl but herself and Lindita), Bruce said, "You must have a tango."

"El tango!" cried Julio excitedly. *"El tango Argentino!"* He searched quickly through the records, and in a minute the tune was on.

Mary saw him guide his sister into the graceful rhythm of the dance. And as she watched Mary felt her sadness die out, felt no longer apprehensive or near danger, but wooed from them for a time by sheer admiration. The dark-haired brother and sister were gliding together in perfect understanding, with such dignity and grace that Mary thought all other dances had become banal and gawky in retrospect. Forward, aside, recovery—they made figures over the oak floor, they were gulls over the sea, they were deer down the forest, they were all swift and graceful things as they swept across the room. . . .

"Oh, beautiful!" cried someone as the tune ended, but the spectators were quite still, as though afraid that their dancers would do no more.

Julio stood in the centre of the room, not even out of

breath, but his head lifted and his body still in immaculate composure. He was perfectly conscious of their admiration, perfectly—as it seemed—unaffected by it. Lindita beside him appeared as usual to be watching something infinitely far away.

In a moment Bruce had turned the record, and again the two gleamed out across the floor. Lindita's little pale dress against the buff walls was like a mote of colour inside the eyelid, for ever in motion from point to point of the room, in even motion, pausing but never quite still. And her strong arrogant brother was holding her, guiding her, dancing as though he and she were alone in the room, as though oblivious of his own grace.

Mary looked for a moment at the spectators—Tito, his brown face fresh and cool above a white shirt half hidden by folded arms, with a fixed unconscious smile of pride, was beside her ; next was the Mouse, watching their feet, interested, alive to a new experience. Peter, his round face glowing from the sunlight of the afternoon and the wine of the evening, seemed remotely aware of something that he would not himself have called beauty, but which held him spellbound. Ffoffell, Mary thought, was trying to mask real by tired enthusiasm, and Bruce, leaning on the gramophone, was too excited to move or speak. He never took his eyes from the two dancers.

At last it ended. They all burst out into noisy applause through which Mary caught Ffoffell's "Oh, but perfectly *fait à peindre !*" and the Mouse's "I've never seen *anything* so good !"

Children, children all of them, she thought, even Tito and Ffoffell. And she felt old tonight. Mother of them all. She felt as though she had seen something which affected them, but which they had not seen, like one of a rejoicing family who has heard of a death and must break it to the others, and cannot bear to make them stop laughing. As though the thoughts which had tortured her in the afternoon were prophetic, and she alone were in the secret. But she made another plucky effort to throw off her dark preoccupation. She danced with Tito.

CHAPTER XVI

BRUCE

MIDSUMMER'S Day. Bruce turned to Ffoffell at eleven o'clock, because the sun was making the pages of a text-book a glaring white, and the morning was calling breezily, and he had arranged to go to Canterbury. . . .

"I say, do you think we need any more ?"

Ffoffell considered. "Bruce, my dear, your impetuosity will kill you. What is this wide-eyed zest I see in your face ?"

"I'm going to take Julio and Lindita to Canterbury in the car."

Ffoffell sighed. "It sounds elysian . . ." he said.

"Of course—we'd have asked you. Only the car, you know, a two-seater . . ."

"Oh, quite," said Ffoffell, then added a little soulfully, "*Jeunesse ! Jeunesse !*"

"Then ?"

"Well, perhaps we could call it a half-holiday. I haven't the smallest doubt that you'll pass your exam. next week."

"Thanks awfully, Mr. Ffoffell." Bruce rose hurriedly. "See you later !"

He bounded downstairs to find the other two already waiting. Julio was impatient and asked why he had been so long. Bruce knew that the cause of this was not Julio's wish to be with him. For a few weeks after their arrival at Silliwake the triple companionship had sufficed. Then Julio had found what he called a "beet of stuff" in a neighbouring town. Bruce never saw the lady, but he gathered from Julio that she possessed all the qualifications

he required. She was plump—expressive curves in the air by Julio gave him a vivid impression of her contours —she was fair, and she was amenable. So Julio took to going off frequently, leaving Bruce and Lindita alone.

For Julio's sake this was done covertly. The three would set out together on foot or in the car, and Julio would disappear only when they had arranged a time and place for meeting, in order to return to the house together. "You see, old chap," Julio had told him privately, "I have to be discreet. The old man doesn't mind, but he has always said, 'Do nothing on your own doorstep.' See?" Bruce, remembering Julio of old, had indeed "seen", and the arrangement had answered well.

Today, he knew, Julio intended that Bruce should drive through Tunbridge Wells and drop him there. So he pretended to be quite unhurried.

"What are you waiting for?" said Julio.

"I'm not waiting. Just going to get ready," said Bruce, apparently immersed in a newspaper.

Julio took another turn up and down the room. Bruce smiled at Lindita under the cover of his paper, for she perfectly understood. Presently Julio snatched the paper away. "You young devil," he laughed, finding it upside down, "you come along at once and drive like hell. I shall be late for my *rubia*!"

They went out into the warm morning and clambered into the car. Before the engine was started they were aware of a call from above them, and turned to see Ffoffell waving graciously from a window. "The three Graces!" he said. "Who'll have the golden apple?"

"Shut up!" growled Julio under his breath. "Step on it, Bruce!"

Bruce gave an apologetic wave to his tutor as he sent the car forward. Julio urged him on unnecessarily till they stopped for him to alight. He paused to remind Bruce of their rendezvous, then went hastily up a side turning.

"Julio and his girls!" exclaimed Bruce as they drove away.

"Yes. Isn't he incorrigible ?" said Lindita. "Always a fresh one."

"But he seems to enjoy it."

Lindita said nothing. Her eyes were on the road before them, and she had sunk back into the corner away from Bruce.

"We shall just about get to Canterbury for lunch," said Bruce.

"Good."

He was always happy and enlivened with her, always glad when they were alone, but they never found much to say to each other. Once or twice lately he had felt an urgent need to approach her—to draw her mind to his. They were harmonized enough, but he wanted to give expression to something which troubled him when he had her with him. "You know, Lindita . . ." he began presently, when they were out on an open road.

But she had sensed the coming intimacy. "What do I know ?" she said with an almost mocking smile.

"I . . . I like being with you. . . ."

Her hand went up to the collar of her coat, and she gave her head a small self-conscious twist as though to throw back imaginary hair. "Do you ?"

"Terribly. I can't explain. We seem to understand each other." He looked round to see her blushing unhappily.

"That's good," she said.

"I feel I can talk to you. There are so few people with whom I've felt that. My mother, of course, and a dear old great-aunt of mine who died."

Lindita turned to him. "Tell me about her," she said, seemingly glad to divert the conversation. "You've never mentioned her."

"Oh, she died just before we moved here. She wrote a bit, you know." He realized when he had said it that he had merely used Aunt Eileen's expression. He felt the miserable inadequacy of his own power of words. "She . . . was a wonderful old lady. People thought she was bitter, but she wasn't. She made that dreadful

place possible. . . ." So that was all he could manage as epitaph for Aunt Pittery! "You know," he added suddenly. "I feel a fool when I try to explain anything."

"Say it in English, then, Bruce."

"Oh, it's not that. Anyway, I can never say what I mean exactly. I was trying to tell you something. The only people I have ever been able to confide in were mother and her, and about some things the Mouse, and you. I could tell you anything."

"I wonder why," said Lindita distantly.

"Oh, you're . . . different. You don't ask absurd questions. You don't say a lot of silly things at the end —advice and so on. You take it all in, though."

"Well, talk away. What do you want to tell me about?"

"I dunno. . . ."

"Go faster."

"We're doing fifty."

"Never mind. Faster."

"You see . . . I've never known any girls."

"Why not?"

"Well, they've never come my way. There was Paula. She was my cousin."

"What was she like?"

Bruce frowned. "Oh, she was soppy. Hung round me. I suppose you'd call her pretty."

"What kind of pretty?"

"Not like you. Fair hair . . . well, earth-coloured. Very big eyes."

"What colour eyes?"

"Aunt Eileen called 'em violet."

"Go on."

"That's what she looked like. I liked her best of the family."

"Did you?"

"Yes, but that's not saying much. The others were awful."

"Why?"

"Oh, they meant well. But they . . . well, I don't want to think about that. It was a hell of a time. Everything's different now. You've come to England. . . ."

"I like it."

"I like your being here."

"Good."

"Fast enough ?"

"I don't mind how fast you go !"

He looked at her again. She sat square in her seat, her shoulders back, her hands on her lap, her eyes ahead, enjoying the speed. She seemed to own the world over which they were rushing. "Lindita . . ." he said.

"Mm ?"

"I think you're like a princess."

"What a silly thing to say."

"It did sound rather silly, didn't it ?"

"Yes."

"What I mean is . . . you're . . ."

"Shut up, Bruçito."

"All right."

They slowed down to drive carefully through Maidstone, a policeful town, but roared up the hill beyond on the Ashford road.

"Bruce . . ."

"Yes ?"

"Do you think your mother's happy ?"

"Happy ? Rather. I've never known her so cheerful. You know, she and your father have always been more or less . . . well . . . you know . . . in love, and so on. Now they're married at last, mother's fearfully pleased. It's like a book."

"I'm afraid you will always see things like a book."

"What do you mean ?"

"I don't think she's happy. Not really, you know. She's worried."

"Worried ?"

"Mm. As though she were always expecting something awful to happen."

"Lindita, what a funny serious little creature you are! Imagining that sort of thing!"

"It's true."

"Oh, rot. I know when Mother's happy." He rather resented Lindita's intrusion. After all, she was his mother—not her's.

Lindita sighed. "Perhaps you know best," she said.

"I do, about that," said Bruce. "We turn off this road in a minute."

They had been flying over the smooth, tarred surface, past newly built cafés that marred the full-breasted country beyond. And they climbed a narrower hill to cross country for Canterbury.

"I'm enjoying this," commented Lindita.

"Splendid. So 'm I. I always do—with you."

"Are we nearly there?"

"Not far. Then lunch."

"That will be lovely!"

Bruce soon got tired of Canterbury, but Lindita did not. She wanted to see everything—the whole Cathedral, the dirty indoor market, the quaint winding back-streets. With her quick, considering eyes she looked about her as a bird might, saying little, but deeply interested. Not until they were having tea did she make any coherent comment. Then, after eating a piece of bread-and-butter very thoughtfully, "I like it," she pronounced.

Bruce, inclined till then to be made irritable by the sweltering streets, and the arid length of a sight-seeing afternoon, burst out laughing.

"What's the matter, Bruce?"

"I was amused at you. You go all over the most historic town in England without saying a word, then, as though to settle it once and for all, you say, 'I like it.'"

Lindita did not join his laugh. "But, after all, isn't that the most anyone can say about anything?"

"I suppose so," said Bruce.

"Did you get tired?"

"A bit. I've been here before."

"Poor Bruçito. I had no idea."

"Lindita—my dear, I didn't mean I wasn't enjoying it. I told you this morning I'm always happy with you."

Lindita pouted uncomfortably. Soon they went out again to the car.

"I say!" exclaimed Bruce on the way home. "Do you know what today is?"

"Yes. Damn' hot," said Lindita in English.

Bruce laughed. "I don't mean that," he said. "It's Midsummer's Day."

"What about it?"

"All the fairies are supposed to come out."

"Really, when?"

"At night, of course. Not in the day-time."

"Oh yes. That's the time in the Shakespeare play. I read it in Spanish."

"That's right. Did you do it in the *Colejio*?"

"Yes. We each read a part."

"And I did it at school in England. Last year. How extraordinary."

"It was beautiful."

"I liked the part at the end." He drove on silently for a long time. Then: "I say, Lindita, listen!" he said. "I've got an idea."

"What is it?"

"Let's go out tonight. I've never been out on Midsummer's night."

"But how could we?"

"When everyone's asleep."

"With Julio?"

"No; Julio wouldn't come; he'd laugh. We wouldn't tell him."

"But . . . Bruce, how . . ."

"I know. I'd put a ladder up to your window. At midnight. Then you'd come down, and we'd go for a walk. You must."

"Ought we?"

"Lindita! We've never thought about what we ought to do. It would be marvellous. It's going to be a fine night. We'd go right across the fields. Oh, do come!"

"What a baby you are, Bruce!"

"I'm eighteen."

"Well—fairies."

"I don't mean for that. For fun. It *would* be fun, you know. We'd not tell anyone else. You must come."

"I don't mind coming."

"Hooray. Then I shall put a ladder against your window at twelve o'clock."

"Right."

"You won't go to sleep and forget?"

"Very likely."

"But you mustn't."

"I'll try not to."

He was excited by the idea. To his rather conventional mind it seemed to represent the most bold, the most soaring flight into romance. Midsummer night—he and Lindita creeping out under the moon . . . how had he managed to conceive anything so daring? He drove on blissfully, his grey cap pulled a shade further down the side of his head, feeling brave and piratical and at the same time tensely aware of Lindita. . . .

Julio was waiting for them, bursting with confidences. Almost before he was in the car he began: "What a day . . . took her out in the country . . . she's lovely, Bruce . . ." He did not seem aware of his sister. "English girls understand love . . . calls me a cowboy . . . what's that? Says I'm 'awful'—but likes it, you know. Came back to a *thé dansant*, but she can't dance—really. Never mind. I'm meeting her tomorrow."

Bruce found himself no longer jealous. In fact he was almost contemptuous of Julio's rhapsody. "You'll have forgotten all about her next week," he said.

"No, no! She's my little *inglesita rubia*; she's my 'darling'!" Julio exclaimed.

"And the one on the boat? . . ." put in Lindita.

"Oh, that was an old sheep compared to this. Are we late for dinner?"

"No, tons of time."

"Have you had a good day?" He did not wait for

an answer. "I have. I made love all the afternoon. She knew how to kiss! I'm going to stay in England, Bruce!"

Bruce exchanged a thrilling glance with Lindita. They had a secret, too. He was no longer left out of all this romanticizing. For the first time he began to feel himself in the part of someone's admirer, for the first time to fill in the blank he had long ago sensed in his new life.

"Lindita liked Canterbury," he said, trying to make her speak.

"Yes," she said, "you missed more than you got, Julio."

"Rubbish. Old buildings? Give me flesh and blood," said her brother, as they entered the drive.

After dinner that evening Bruce went up to his rooms alone. He wanted to think. He was conscious of something stirring in him like music. He tried to understand his new mood, but could not. And at last, after he had wandered restlessly round the room for a time, he threw himself in a chair and faced the question which had been vaguely haunting him, but which he had not yet braved—afraid, perhaps, that it was fatuous. But now he looked at himself full in the glass before him and said "Am I in love?" All the books he had read described love in different ways. In some it was a great inward flame which sent people out to be violent and passionate. In others it was something sad and suffering. Some made it a matter of mere desire, and seemed deliberately to give him alluring visions of the bodily grace of a girl. Others showed him a man who only wanted to serve, to foresee the whims of his adored one. He remembered lovers who went proudly on their way, calling, as it were to heel, some worshipping female. No two ever reacted in the same way. How, then, was he to know? Could he assume from the mere fact that he did not know, that he was not really in love?

He tried to think clearly what were his emotions with Lindita. But when he did so his mind was filled with

incongruous delightful vistas of her, or recollections of things she had said. Did he want to kiss her? Well, yes. Very much? No—not really. Except that lovers always did kiss. She would hate it. She was cold, he thought, distant—and yet not cold. Burning—somewhere. There was fire in her, if he only knew how to make it blaze out. The way she would suddenly be angry, or amused, or dispirited . . . all that meant that she was not really cold. Yet she would not like him to kiss her. Why not? Was it that she did not want him? But she did. He knew she did. No—it was because she was . . . enthroned, somehow.

He did not quite understand, but he knew that that was the truth. Lindita, as he had sheepishly told her, was a princess. She was alone on her high, cold throne. It would not matter what she did, however much she came out among people, danced and drank and laughed and talked, she was always someone apart, aloof from him even. That was the difference between her and Paula. Paula would have done anything for him. She —Bruce uncomfortably admitted it to himself for the first conscious time—she would have given herself, for the asking, to him. And so, perhaps, he had not wanted her. But Lindita was above that. High on her cold throne . . .

And he did not want anything like that from Lindita. Good God, no! He bit his lip. It was vile to think about. She was not to be sullied by such a thought . . . she was intangible. Well, then, if he did not want to touch her, how could he suppose that he was in love with her?

He considered deeply. He did not want to kiss her . . . well, not very much, but he could not bear it if anyone else did. Then he did want to possess her. In a sense. He wanted to be only her suitor. He wanted her to reign over him . . . his princess. She was beautiful and sacred, and he would adore her . . . kiss her hand. That was it, that was his attitude, he would kiss her hand.

And he would. Tonight he would. When he took her out—oh, silver dream!—when he took her out through the garden and down the avenue, over the fields, perhaps, he would take her hand and kiss it. She would not understand. All the better. He did not want her to. She would think he desired her. With Julio's example always before her she could not help imagining that, if she once had the idea that his action meant anything. No—he would not say a word, just snatch her hand, kiss it, and let it go. Then he would feel he had lived a part of his dream. . . .

He smoked quickly through another cigarette. Barely ten o'clock. Two hours to wait. His mother was going to bed early—unwell. She had looked rather tired lately. Surely there could be nothing in what Lindita had said about her. Worried . . . but why? What could she have to worry about? She had everything she could desire . . . she had married the man she had loved ever since his father was killed. It must be just a little ill health. But how she had clung to him that evening. Differently. Not just good night as usual. But with a sort of aching look. And a few days ago she had said something rather strange. They had been together in the garden. "Bruce"—he remembered how she had stopped suddenly and touched his arm—"Bruce, nothing could ever get you away from me, could it?" Of course he had laughed that away. "Even . . . even if you had a disappointment . . . found I was different from what you thought. . . ." He had kissed her, he remembered. Silly of her to talk like that. She must have been tired or nervy.

But what a wonderful, what a divine woman she was! She must have been like Lindita when she was young. That same fragility—so that no one could ever have thought of her except with a kind of reverence. How his father must have loved her to have *dared*——

His thoughts were interrupted by a short ring at the door of his flat. Ffoffell or Julio? Probably Ffoffell, coming up to talk. At first he felt provoked by the

obtrusion . . . then he thought it would be pleasant to be no longer alone. Especially if it were Julio.

He went down to find Ffoffell there. "Oh, Bruce, my dear, may I come up for a little while? I have been feeling so wistful! Do let me chatter half an hour away with you . . ."

Not altogether unwillingly Bruce brought him upstairs. There was a long time to go before he could meet Lindita, and he felt that he could talk confidentially this evening. Ffoffell, for all his effeminacy, made a rather good confidant at times. "Have a drink?" said Bruce.

"I'd adore one. The merest scent of something."

"Whisky-and-soda? Brandy? A liqueur?"

"I think perhaps a liqueur."

"I've only Cointreau."

"Oh, Bruce, you naughty boy! Just enough to make the glass sticky. Thanks."

"Why naughty boy?" asked Bruce.

"Oh, never mind . . ." simpered Ffoffell. "And what are you doing up here all alone?"

"I was thinking."

"My dear, how ingenious of you! Can you actually pass time that way?"

"Are you pulling my leg? I'm rather serious tonight."

"Indeed? Mayn't I attune my mood, as it were? Tell me all about it."

"But you'll probably laugh."

"Now, Bruce, that's very unkind! Have I ever laughed at you?"

"I expect so. You think I'm a young boor."

"Oh no, no, no. If you really want to know what I think of you, I . . ."

"I don't," said Bruce hurriedly. "It's not about me. At least not altogether."

"Oh, how ravishingly young you are when you talk like that!"

"You see, I think I'm in love."

Mr. Ffoffell hurriedly set down his liqueur and sat up theatrically. "In love?" he said.

"Why not?"

He recovered. "Why not indeed? You were born to play *jeune premier*," he said. "And who . . . who?"

"Lindita," said Bruce tersely.

"Oh, fascinating! Oh, my dear, *what* an idyll! Oh, where's my Theocritus? Bruce, the honeyed swain, with his rapturous child of a shepherdess . . . it's . . ."

"It's nothing like that," said Bruce. "She doesn't dream of it, of course. She's only fifteen, you know."

"Is that all? Dear, dear! I should have said two years older. The Latin races will always be a cypher to me."

"Of course I shan't say anything to her. Not yet, anyway. I don't want to drag her into it. I feel she's sort of . . . above all that, you know. . . ."

Mr. Ffoffell leaned forward. "Now, Bruce, my dear," he said. "I'm going to be very frank. And don't let me see that horrid little pout on your lips, because you'll thank me one day for what I'm going to say to you. This will never do, my dear. Never. You weren't made for that sort of thing. You're the Apollo, you know, not the humble shepherd. Yours the triumphant part. You're one of what Ezra Pound calls the 'Gods of the winged shoe'. You're just trying to play a part in this affair. It's delightfully Thespian—if you see what I mean—but it won't do. It just won't do."

"But I'm not," said Bruce, too gratified by being so earnestly discussed to be annoyed. "I'm sure I'm not."

"Oh yes, you are," said Mr. Ffoffell knowingly. "I can see it too well. And one day you'll realize it. My dear, it's for you to be worshipped—if you can manage to conceive my meaning. Women at your feet, you know, and all that sort of thing. You'll get it one day, and if you have been content till then with star-gazing at this child, it will turn your head. But you won't take any notice of me. Nobody ever does." Bruce said nothing. "Anyway, I think it's *too* touching."

"Thanks," said Bruce bluntly.

"Does your mother know all about it?"

"Lord, no! You mustn't say a word, of course."

"Discretion shall be my name," said Mr. Ffoffell. "But you must tell her one day. She will be too delighted, I'm sure. You know, Bruce, I *admire* your mother tremendously." Bruce gave an impatient jerk to his legs. "And, my dear, *how* she adores you! You ought to feel a sense of responsibility in being loved like that." Mr. Ffoffell had had another liqueur.

"Cigarette?" said Bruce.

"No, thanks. I wonder what the time is. Oh dear, oh dear, it's twenty past eleven. I must be off to bed. I shall miss my beauty sleep. Good night, Bruce. Pleasant dreams!"

"Good night," said Bruce quickly. He heard the door at the foot of his stairs closed. He sat still a few minutes pondering indignantly over Ffoffell's impertinence. It seemed that everyone knew more about his mother than he did. Damn' cheek! He went down to the door of his flat, throwing aside all considerations, and preparing for his escapade. Tensely he listened; the whole house was still.

Bruce felt his cheeks hot and his heart pounding as he stooped to take off his shoes. Holding them, he started his widing journey down the house. There was a light under Ffoffell's door, but from Tito's room rose a slow, regular snore, and from his mother's darkness and silence. He crept silently down the stairs, his feet sinking comfortably into the thick carpet. Then he approached the kitchen quarters, for it was here that dangerous wakefulness might be. But it must have been an early night for the servants—there was no one still up.

He stood in the hall, conscious of the rich smell of old oak, fruit, and Tito's cigar-smoke. Moonlight shot across the floor and the room seemed lovable and luxurious in this mysterious solitude. He wondered why he had never come down to it before at night—he would like to sit here another time, and watch the shadowy lawn from its windows.

But now there must be no time lost. He put on his

shoes, opened one of the heavy leaded lattices, and dropped on to the grass which spread to the brickwork of the house. Not until he had got the long fruit-ladder from the side of the garage and set it against the wall below Lindita's window did he pause to look about him. It was quite still—except that once or twice a rare shiver of breeze ruffled a few boughs with its dying gasp. So silent was the night that it seemed as though the very mist was audible, as it spread itself over the lawn. Then, braving all the world of noiseless growth, an owl gave two tentative hoots and was mum again.

Bruce waited. And as he did so he felt a hush of expectancy in the air. It seemed that the night itself was awaiting its lover, and every creature of the night. He looked up at the stars—hard, almost aggressive they seemed, so burning clear were they above him. But the dear moon was not aggressive, she floated up, round and benign, over the house, as though she, too, were lost in the sky, and waiting for someone to come and lead her home. Yes, everything was waiting tonight. The birds were perched visibly about him, their little doubting eyes fixed on the distance ; down in the barns the patient cattle stood motionless, their big, kindly faces hopeless but stolidly alert ; the very flowers which scented the damp air were still with expectation. He felt that a sudden sound would fill the air with a deafening chorus from them all, with a chime of bells and a shriek of wind to swell it. But no sound came.

Beside him a swollen rose which tomorrow would have dropped its creasing petals was silver-plated by the moon. And across the lawn the shadow-lines were harsher than ever in the day. It was an unfamiliar garden, holding its breath. She would come, he knew she would come. She would not fail him, his lovely princess. She would step down beside him, and off they would go, themselves black shadows, and later he would kiss her hand. Certainly he would kiss her hand. Did he love her ? Again, did he ? Of course. This must be love, this flushed expectancy in which the night had joined.

Ffoffell had talked nonsense. He did not understand Ffoffell, but felt instinctively that he resembled Julio in one thing—he was sated. Ffoffell could not really comprehend this panting homage to the mere loveliness of Lindita, which had no ambition for more real contact. Ffoffell saw him as unfitted for genuflexion. Let him go—let them all go, they would never understand. It was something with which his mother alone would sympathize, if he could tell her about it. He would try one day. It would be hard. Only his mother, because she herself was so pure, would understand his passionless adoration of Lindita. . . .

Suddenly there was a click above him, and her window was opened—ten minutes before time. In a few moments she was beside him ; her fur collar was turned up to her chin, but she was shivering. "Oh, Bruce, it's *beastly*," she said. "I was asleep, and I had to get up in the cold !"

"But, Lindita—look !" He waved vaguely about them.

"Come on," she said, "let's run and get warm."

They trotted down the drive a hundred yards, then Lindita broke into a walk. "That's better," she said.

"Take my arm and keep close if you're cold."

"No. It's all right."

The big elms were black and monstrous over them and the gate ahead showed very white where the moon struck it. Their footsteps rang out, so silent was the drive. Bruce looked anxiously down at her, afraid that she was not going to enjoy it. "It's not really cold," he said.

"No. It seemed it when I got up."

"That was because you'd been asleep."

They came out on the road and turned right towards Shipbourne. Only in one of the cottages they passed was there a light, and they peered over the hedge, wondering who was still awake, and what was happening behind the blinds. Then on again till the road ran beside a wood, and there was a faint rustling.

"It's rather lovely," admitted Lindita at last.

Bruce was delighted. "I knew you'd like it. Let's go down here till we come to the big meadow, then cross it to the pond in the middle."

"All right."

They came at last to a five-barred gate on their right. "You'll have to climb over this," said Bruce. "It's kept locked. I'll get over first and help you."

But she ignored his extended hand and dropped lightly to the ground. They were now on a cart track with woods to right and left. Sticks cracked under their feet as they walked, and a stack of faggots took a black shape beside them. It was very dark here, and they progressed slowly. Suddenly there was a scrimmage in the undergrowth, two points of greenish light, and something scurried away down the path, something that seemed very big in the darkness. Lindita stopped short at the sound, tense and staring, but she made no sign of fear, did not even come closer to him.

"What was it ?" she whispered.

"A fox !" said Bruce.

"Was it really ? Oh, that's better than fairies. I've never seen a fox."

At last they came to the top of the big meadow, an immense expanse of grass from which the hay had lately been cut. It stretched out under the moon for thirty acres, and in its centre, just discernible from the gate on which they leaned, was a clump of trees which, they knew, surrounded a pond. Without a word Bruce opened the gate, and they started to cross the field. In a moment the dew had wet them almost to the knees.

"Oh, it's cold !" said Lindita. "I'm soaked."

Bruce, his grey flannels sticking damply to his ankles, said, "Never mind. It's only dew. You can change when we get back."

"Catch me !" said Lindita suddenly, and she was off across the field as swift as a doe. When Bruce gained on her she dodged aside, and again, so that his hand clutched air. But she waited for him at last, rather breathless.

Bruce held the branches aside when they had reached the little tree-surrounded pond. Its water looked stagnant and chilly, and plopped unresponsively when he threw a stone into it. But there was a low-hanging bough on which Lindita leaned, rocking herself gently. "If there were any fairies," said Lindita unexpectedly, "they wouldn't come out tonight. It's too wet."

"But it's always wet at night—like this. And it hasn't rained."

"Well, they wouldn't."

Bruce knew that if he were ever to keep his resolve he must kiss her hand now. But why? It seemed silly, inappropriate somehow. She would think him a fool. And yet . . . he had determined to do it. He must. Rather clumsily he bent down and put his lips against her knuckles. Lindita laughed.

"Oh, Bruce, how funny you are! Why did you do that?"

"Dunno," said Bruce, glad that the darkness hid his hot blushes. "Just the way you looked or something. . . ."

"Come along," said Lindita, "let's get home."

They were tired. Bruce felt himself cold and weary —the magic of the night suddenly banal. Almost in silence they returned by a quicker way across the fields. But as they approached the house she seemed to relent, and for a moment took his arm.

"It's been fun," she said.

CHAPTER XVII

MARY

AUTUMN came early that year. Before September was over the evenings had grown gusty and rather chill, so that the three young people coming home in the late afternoon were dark shadows against a slated and stormy sunset, or indistinct figures whose cheery voices were audible from the mist before they came clearly into sight. The garden, too, seemed to grow colourless and forlorn before its time, so that Mary was glad of the great fire in the hall and had the curtains drawn early.

She was a little perturbed by the sense of fading summer about her. Like most people who love deeply and illogically, she had a most acute sensitiveness to atmosphere, and in the lowering autumn skies there was something obscurely threatening. She tried in vain to trace this . . . premonition to a definite cause. But there was nothing in the cheerful, vigorous life of the young people to arouse her apprehensions—they remained staunchly buoyant and devoted, immersed, it seemed, in the facile diversions that their life in the country provided. But though she could not explain it even to herself, this sense of foreboding intermittently troubled her.

It was not that she was disappointed in Silliwake. It had done all she could expect of it. She had realized very soon after marrying Tito that there are only a limited number of things that can be done with money, and that they have been done before. It was not that. It was something in the future.

She spent a great deal of time alone. She would go up to her little room, to an arm-chair which was drawn up to the window, and watch the daylight going out of the

garden. She was rather disquieted to find that this habit of lonely brooding was noticed by the children and perplexed them. She was not always able to enter into the spirit of their energetic days as she had done at first, and they seemed to want her. She felt that an obsession was a lonely thing, for which no one could have much sympathy. Even had she wanted to burden them with her own foolish imaginings, even if she had desired to drag Bruce into them, she could not have explained what was amiss. They were all kind to her, even loved her, but there was an . . . ache in her life which she could not tell anyone about. So she found after a time that they grew accustomed to her periodical despondency, and left her with the kind of sympathy they would have shown to an invalid.

Perhaps it was that, the very fact that she was given a special and fond consideration, which first made Mary think of herself as someone apart, as divided from them by a barrier subtly understood by them and her. And once this had entered her mind it led to a peculiar illusion. She occasionally was a prey to the idea that there was a sort of national animosity in the house, that Tito and Julio and Lindita, the three Argentines, were in some way hostile to her and Bruce. The least remark, however light, made by them about anything English, or a joke which could be constructed as reflecting a spirit of rivalry, disturbed her uncontrollably. Once, when the three children had been riding and Bruce had had a slight fall, they were discussing it in the hall afterwards.

"Oh, Bruce," Julio said, "you'll never be a *gaucho* if you can't keep on a horse!"

Bruce had smiled, but Mary had turned bitterly to her stepson. "I'm sure he has no wish to be," she said, and left the room. She felt their eyes following her. She was conscious of a burning belief that there were forces marshalled against her among them. She scarcely realized what she had said.

Julio followed her upstairs. His kind, sensual face was distressed. "I'm so sorry," he said, catching her up on

the landing and taking her hand. "I did not mean to hurt you."

But Mary could not answer. She went into her own room and shut the door.

They were not angry with her—then, or at any time. She could feel that they discussed her lovingly, sympathetically, and accounted for it all in some sensible way. "She's overstrung or upset about something." "She needs a holiday"—they probably said. But Mary could tell them nothing.

After Bruce's entrance to the University had been settled, and Ffoffell had left Silliwake, this delusion of a conspiracy increased, for he too had been English, and now she and Bruce were alone.

Yet such thoughts were not very frequent to her. Most often when she was much with Bruce and Julio and Lindita, she was cheerful, and proud of her two children, and quietly fond of Julio. . . . She encouraged them all to talk to her, sitting with them in her demure and thoughtful way, entering blithely upon their trivial confidences, glad of their friendliness. That, she felt, was the difference between herself and Eileen. She was no cleverer than her sister, but she was at least young and inquisitive and interested, not closed up and certain like Eileen. She had never been sure of anything, never had a really fixed opinion, so she could enjoy other people's. She loved listening to the light-hearted nonsense that the three talked.

But those months held a series of vacillations. Just when she felt sure of herself again, and had overcome the dark thoughts which, when she had escaped them, seemed foolish to her, something invariably happened to send her doubting into a phantasmagoria of premonition. For instance, there was her stupid and thoughtless agitation at a remark Tito made. He innocently suggested a holiday to her.

Mary looked up at him sharply, almost as a person slightly unbalanced with suspicion might have done. "Why ?" she said quickly.

"I think it would do you good, Dolorosita."

She at once burst into tears. Tito stood, amazed and deeply stirred, unable to say anything. Mary looked up at him again and said vehemently: "You shan't get me away from him."

At once Tito understood, and came clumsily close to her. He took her hand and kissed it several times. "Darling, darling, I had no such idea. No one shall ever do that! Mary, I do understand how you feel about the boy—you have suffered so much. It was for your sake I suggested a holiday. You have looked so tired lately."

Mary quickly recovered. "Thank you, Tito. When Bruce has gone up to Oxford I will come away with you. I should like to. But not just yet." Then, returning his kiss, "I am sorry," she added shortly.

But Mary knew that Tito did not really understand. No one did. How could they? Most potently of all Mary longed for someone who would perceive in a moment the aching and apprehensive wretchedness that she felt, someone who could soothe her as a child is soothed. She had never quite lost her infant's sense of trust in the competence of humanity to manage itself, as though, if she could only have met them, there were omniscient people somewhere to whom her elusive oppressions would seem nothing. If only she could confide, completely confide, all she was undergoing, the weight might be lifted. But there was no one—and if there were she could not explain.

Then came the afternoon when she found Ffoffell's letter. It was a grey and forbidding day, and she had put on a heavy fur coat to walk once or twice round the garden before tea. She had been feeling a little physically unwell in the morning, a headache and slight giddiness. She thought the air would do her good.

Down beyond the shrubbery was an autumn bonfire; its crackling attracted her to stroll in that direction. She stood for a moment watching one of the gardeners steadily piling refuse on to an already considerable heap, and the

thick creamy smoke that rose from it. Then she returned to the rose-garden. She passed aimlessly down the grass pathways, gazing at the big crestfallen blooms and the torn petals blown from them. Then, among those of a deep red colour strewn round a short tree, she saw a piece of half-burnt paper. It looked untidy there. Mary stooped to retrieve it.

Walking back towards the bonfire, meaning to return the paper to the heap from which it had obviously been blown, she examined it absently. It bore the exuberant handwriting of Ffoffell. Mary caught her son's name on the paper, at once folded it in her hand, and returned to the house.

Up in her room she examined the charred fragment. It was part of a letter.

. . . to be able to come up and see you soon, and we'll trifle with a meal together. This has been most *interesting. An incredible household. The man's an Argentine, worth millions, my dear, and a nice paunchy old thing, whose clothes are my despair. The wife is lovely to look at—but not clever, and so wrapt up in her son as to be almost* unbalanced, *if you can catch my meaning. She's rather sweet and pathetic though, and I hope he learns to understand her. It rather* terrifies *me, you know, to see her watching over him. One should not, one feels, ever becom . . .* (There was a part indecipherable and a part burnt away here.) *The boy is* most *attractive, but quite normal. She thinks him something unprecedented, which amuses me, because I have to teach him, which of course bores me stiff, as you can imagine! He's perfectly conventional and would be useless in a psychological crisis, one feels. Simply fly back to the sort of spoon-fed ideas she's brought him up on. However, you are not inter . . .* (another burnt corner of paper) *by any means. They are the Argentine's children; Julio, the youth, quite delightfully Paphian, you know, with several* liasons *running in the district, the girl a dignified . . .* (again illegible) *not to call it dull. Of course they all adore me, and I flatter myself . . .*"

The rest was irrelevant.

For a long time Mary studied the letter. At first it did not greatly affect her. "An incredible household" —she supposed it must have seemed so to him, an adult stranger intimately among them, and yet unaware of the melodramatic secret which accounted for so much. Then she came again on the reference to herself. "It almost terrifies me . . ." Then he had felt it too, that emasculated young chatterbox; even he had seen something hanging over them. . . .

She sat quite still, small and jewelled and elegant, her haunted eyes on a bare patch of wall, her fingers holding the paper away from her. She sat quite still, like a bird guarding its nest, watching an intruder, powerless but loyal to its young. Once again Mary felt her security gone, felt the drumming insistence of danger in her ears, was startled and lonely.

It could not go on. She could not much longer face these grinning, beckoning doubts. She was utterly fatigued in mind—she had worked her mind to a tiredness in which each little start, each tiny disruption, burst and shattered all equanimity. . . .

Bruce tapped and without waiting burst into the room. "I say, aren't you coming down to tea, darling?"

On an impulse she handed him the letter. She watched his face while he read it, hot flushes deepening his tan. "Swine!" he said once, and when he had finished it—"My God! I'll find that creature and give him a damn' good hiding. What a dirty little skunk. . . ."

Mary was touched in some way by his indignation. She smiled. "It was a private letter," she said. "I oughtn't to have read it."

"That's nothing to do with it, dear one. To think he was writing that sort of thing about you while he was here. I'd like to break his neck. Anyway, don't *you* worry about it!"

Mary sighed. "I'm not worrying about it," she said.

"You ought not to care what a filthy little rotter like

that says. It is not as though he understood us—you and me."

"You don't think he did ?"

"Well, read it. He talks *utter* rot !"

"Bruce . . ."

"Yes, Mother ?"

Mary suddenly took his hand. "Let's go away together," she said. "Just you and I. At once. Before . . . before . . ." Before what ? Her voice dropped there.

"Do you mean for a few days ? In the car ?"

"No. Altogether. Just we two."

Bruce laughed, patting her hand. "Silly mother." (He evidently had not taken it seriously.) "What would Uncle Tito say to that ?"

Mary said no more. Best that he should think it was a joke. She slowly tore the letter into small pieces.

"That's right," said Bruce. "Think no more about it. And come along down to tea." He pulled her out of the chair.

"Wait a minute," said Mary, "I must comb your hair. It's all over the place. What a boy you are—eighteen and have to have your mother to comb your hair !"

"I like it like that—all tumbly," said Bruce contemplatively before the glass as she did it.

"Now then, vanity !" said Mary, and they went arm-in-arm downstairs.

CHAPTER XVIII

BRUCE

FIFTY yards away from Silliwake was a one-time oast-house, which a former tenant had used as a retreat. The more gregarious Montéz family had never had any use for it, except Lindita, who had quaint fits of misanthropy and occasionally took a book down there in the summer, to lie on a heap of cushions with her heels in the air, reading. She had had her sixteenth birthday that October and was more pronouncedly her own mistress, showing a willing deference only to Mary, and treating Tito much as they all did—as a kindly old bear. But Bruce had discovered the retreat and sometimes intruded on it.

So that when, on the afternoon before he was to go up to Oxford, he could find her nowhere in the house or gardens, Bruce guessed that she was in her oast-house. Without calling Julio he swung out of the house and across the cobbled yard.

He wanted to talk to Lindita. She had been so damned elusive lately. And since he would be away from her for two months he felt that she owed him her presence that afternoon. Besides, that evening Tito was taking both her and Julio up to town to some Argentine affair, and Bruce would only see her again for a few minutes in the morning.

It was not cold, and he had come out hatless, whistling on his way across. Curiously enough he did not find himself as thrilled with the prospect of Oxford as he had imagined. It was exciting of course . . . but lately Lindita had so much filled his thoughts. She had ceased to be for him a subject for airy and lyric devotion, he thought now that he loved her. Yet she always seemed to

escape him . . . such a little Ariel. And tomorrow he must inevitably leave her behind . . . and he could not quite foresee how he was going to feel about it . . . pretty awful, he supposed. Even alluring vistas of Magdalen College, long days of lazy companionship, talk, and "rugger" again, failed, rather to his surprise, to cure him of this sense of parting.

He came to the foot of the oast-house. "Lindita!"

"*Que quiere?*" There was no invitation in her voice.

"May I come up?"

"All right."

She sat up as he came in. The round room was bare except for her pile of cushions, but it was kept scrupulously clean for her, and the oak planks of the floor, once polished, were spotless. Against the greyish background she looked curiously vivid.

"I wanted to talk," said Bruce. "I go up tomorrow."

"Mm?"

"S'pose you're glad."

"No. Of course I'm not glad."

"Well, you're not sorry."

Lindita sighed as though impatient at such shallowness.

"If you want me to say it—yes, I'm sorry."

"I don't like going up, for some reasons."

"But you'll enjoy it when you're there."

"Perhaps. Some of it. But I shall miss you. No, Lindita, it's no use turning away like that, and being cross. I *shall* miss you. And you may as well know it—I love you."

"Oh, Bruce, don't be *stupid*!"

"Well, I do. And really, you know it. You have for ages. What's the good of my going on without telling you? I've tried, but I want to talk about it."

"I don't."

"But why not?"

"Because it's silly."

"It isn't. Not to me. It's real."

"Well, I'm not going to discuss it. I like you, Bruce.

I like being with you when you're sensible. But"—she sighed—"I do hate all this about love."

"But I tell you I can't help it!" Bruce's voice rose excitedly. "You've absolutely got me. I can't think of anything else. And I knew you wouldn't like me to talk about it . . ."

"Then why did you?"

"Because I had to. I must talk about it to someone."

"Well, talk about it to someone else."

"I don't want to. I want you to realize . . ."

"Then I realize. You, Bruce Kerry, love me, Lindita de Montéz Mirán. Is that good enough?"

"Now you're only laughing at me."

"Well, Bruce, you old silly, what else am I to do? You know you're only imagining it all. The worst of you English people is that the things you imagine are so much more real to you than reality."

"But, Lindita . . ." There was exasperated pain in his voice. "But I don't imagine it. I know. I've known for months. I told you once you were a princess, and you said it was a silly thing to say. But it was true. That's how I think of you. Like you are on those cushions . . . sitting there laughing at me!"

"Oh, Bruce, you silly, silly boy! That's how you think of me. Well, can't you see then how unreal it is? It's just an idea you've got into your head. And if you don't get it out it will make a fool of you."

"How?"

"I don't know. Ideas like that always do with people."

"Well, it won't with me. And it's not an idea. It's what I feel."

"Let's talk about something else." She cast round. "Your mother will miss you," she said.

"Will she?"

"Of course." She stooped forward to pull undone a shoe-lace and do it more tightly. "You know, you're a selfish boy, Bruce."

"Why?"

"You don't think nearly enough of her."

"Everyone seems to think they must tell me things like that."

"Everyone but you can see it."

"I suppose I'm to blame because my mother has been . . . seedy lately ?"

"Not exactly. But you can give her patches of pleasure so easily."

"Don't I ?"

"Not all you could. You don't confide in her much."

"I do. I tell her everything. But if you think I don't," he said eagerly, "I'll try to tell her more."

"Good Bruce."

"I shall be alone with her this evening. I'm going to tell her how I feel about you. I've been meaning to for some time. Only it's rather hard, you know."

"Why ?"

"Well, it's not the sort of thing I like telling her about. She's so funny . . . so touchy about some things I tell her. I know she'll be pleased at this—of course. But, you know, sometimes I'm almost afraid to tell her things. She's so easily hurt."

"Yes."

"You know, Lindita . . ."

"Well ?"

"I'm going to marry you one day."

She did not seem to think this worth a reply.

"Really," he added.

She faced him. "Why ?"

"Because I love you."

She laughed outright. "Are all Englishmen like you, Bruce ? Getting a picture in their minds and trying to make it ? I can see what's happened so easily. Why can't you ?"

"What ?"

"Well, you've worked a trick on yourself. You've seen a kind of vision. You loving me. And you so much want it to happen that you've almost made it. But not quite. Not really. I should never marry a man because

he'd got a picture in his head. That's not how we love. We love because we want to love. See ?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, then. Think very carefully and then tell me—what do you see in the future as the most wonderful thing that can happen to you. What do you *see*, not know ?"

"I suppose—you and me with a house of our own, together, somewhere. Abroad perhaps. Or here in Kent. Somewhere round here ; I love this part. One of these villages—Shipbourne, Penshurst, Plaxtol, Sevenoaks——"

"What lovely names !" broke in Lindita irrelevantly. "Say some more !"

"Leigh, Ightham, Hadlow, Weald . . ."

"Go on ! Go on !"

"Oh—Speldhurst, Pembury, Hildenborough, Malling, Farleigh, Mereworth. But never mind. One of them. A little old house, and a car, so that we could come here often and see Mother and Uncle Tito. Yes, I'm sure it would have to be Kent ; within reach of the river, all these trees—an orchard. Somewhere with the smell of hops . . ."

"You're getting quite poetic."

"Well, that's what I see as our future."

She looked solemn again. "Yes, exactly. Pictures, you see. And you want to fit us into them. That's all it is."

"No. It's us first. They'd just be surroundings."

"Even so—*us* to you is only an idea. No, Bruçito, you're not in love. And now I'll tell you something. Perhaps one day I shall love you. I don't now, and I may never. But if I do—I'll love you. No nonsense."

"Lindita ! You . . ."

"Come on, let's go over to the house."

"You've bucked me up no end."

"Good."

"I shall remember what you said."

"All right. Only do come along !"

They walked slowly towards the house. But Bruce gripped her arm. "Lindita!"

"Well?"

"Lindita—let's go out again tonight. Like we did at midsummer!"

"No, no." She shook her head. "Not tonight, Bruce."

"Oh *yes*. Please, Lindita. It would be wonderful. My last night! You won't be in till nearly twelve. You won't have to wake up. You'll be dressed and everything. And I'll have the car ready, out here. We'll slip away—just for an hour. Look, it's going to be a fine night!"

She was dubious. "I shall be so tired," she said.

"Oh, you won't. It will give you some fresh air after your stuffy Argentine dinner. And I promise on my word of honour," he laughed, "I won't even kiss your hand!"

"Well, if you really want it . . ."

"I do. I shan't see you again for ages. It will be a great way of ending the vac. I shall think about it all next term! Twelve o'clock, then?"

"Twelve o'clock."

CHAPTER XIX

MARY

MARY was alone that evening when Tito came to her room. He was in shirt-sleeves, the white waistcoat of his evening dress drawn smoothly over his stomach and his face freshly shaved. He kissed her.

"We shan't be late tonight," he said tentatively after a few minutes.

Mary wondered what he wanted to say to her. "You look very spruce," she remarked.

Tito smiled. "It is a bore, this dinner. But I could not very well get out of it. And you will have Bruce to yourself—his last evening."

"Yes. Is Lindita dressed ?"

"She has only just come in."

What did he want to say ? Polishing his nails, sitting there, his mind was busy with something. "Have you seen Bruce ?"

"I've arranged everything with him. He'll be all right, my dear. How do you feel ?"

"Much better. I've not had my headache for days."

"That's good. That's very good. We'll go away next week. Where would you like to go ?"

Was it this ? Was this what he wanted to discuss ? No—she could feel that it was a mere preliminary. "I don't much mind. Abroad, I think. Do you know I've never been anywhere in Europe, Tito, except just ashore in Spain on the way out to Buenos Aires."

"We'll go abroad, then. Wherever you like."

Distant again. Why could not he come out into the open ? "Paris, perhaps," she murmured, watching him.

"A *passé* Buenos Aires," he said lightly. "I should

rather like Germany again. Or do you want sunshine ?"

Did she want sunshine ? How unreal this conversation was ! What did she care, really, and what did he ? They were shouting to each other from end to end of a tunnel for the sake of shouting. And they both knew it. Well, if he would not say what he meant she would go on till he did. "I don't mind," she said. "Yes, perhaps, somewhere warm . . ."

"We must think. . . ." He got up and put the silk handkerchief with which he had been polishing his nails back into his pocket. Perhaps she was mistaken. He had nothing to say . . . He reached the door and turned. "Oh, by the way, Mary . . ."

"Yes, Tito ?"

"I've asked these people with whom we're dining tonight to dinner next week. They're most charming people . . ."

"That's splendid." Was that all ?

"They're on their way across Europe. He's the new Minister to Aden, you know."

"Oh yes."

"They've known Julio and Lindita since they were children. I'd like you to meet them."

"Of course, I'll be delighted, Tito." That was all. She was relieved. Nothing more than an Argentine family coming to dinner.

"Mary . . ." He was nearly through the door, and returned as though with a new resolve.

"Yes, dear ?"

"You'll be nice to them, won't you ?"

She smiled. "Aren't I always nice to your friends ?"

"Oh yes, darling. Only I don't want them to think—you see I've known them so long—I don't want them to think my wife's unhappy. You understand—you'll look your best, won't you ? You are so lovely when you do that !"

So that was it ! With a great effort Mary gave him a smiling nod, anxious for him to close the door. He went. "Look your best." Now she understood—that was why

he had come here, hesitating over their conversation. That was why he had stood like that in the doorway, like a guilty little boy! He wanted to ask her to show herself off! And to a lot of Argentines! How abominable! She was red and indignant. She became essentially Smetham in a second. It was the most degrading thing—to be asked to look her best.

That was what he had married her for, really. He may not have realized it more than she had, but it was this . . . low-down vain proprietorship of her that had made him come to England and propose to her. He thought she was beautiful. He wanted these people, who knew him out there, to come and say he was a man of taste and discernment who had married a fascinating *inglesa*. He wanted to sit in a tall chair at table, his elbows resting on its arms, and smile round at them as much as to say, "Taste my champagne, it's Veuve Clicquot 1921. Eat this dinner—my chef costs £300 a year. Look at my wife—she's the best quality." He wanted to chuckle round at them, so satisfied and happy. He wanted her to "be nice" to them and look her best. And all the Smetham in Mary made her think it was common, it was the scene she read about in paper-covered novels.

Of course—that was it. He was Sir Eustace and she was Emmeline. "All was not well with Emmeline . . ." She'd read it a hundred times. "In spite of the gilded luxury of her home, her soul was plunged in misery. Sir Eustace, who showered all that money could buy on her, denied to her . . ." et cetera. And yet . . . it was not quite that. Tito was in a way too simple to be a Sir Eustace. And she had had the part to read over before she had consented to play Emmeline.

But he *had* insulted her. However cinematographical it was, he had said a brutal thing. He was demanding of her something far more degrading than the mere gift of herself which she had originally feared. "Look your best." She crossed to the glass. The hot flush on her cheeks, the wet distressed largeness of her eyes, and the

irrelevant youthfulness of her face made her smile. She was beautiful. No one could deny that. And Tito had been afraid that by being . . . *distrait*, not grinning at them like a puppet, she would make it unobvious. "You are so lovely when you do that," he said. In spite of herself she was amused at him. Lord! how young he was! She had played that trick on Bruce when he was six—never since. "Run in and get Mummy's work-basket. Don't want to? Now run along, Bruce, then Mummy will see what a clever boy you are to find it." And Tito thought he could flatter her like that now. . . .

Yet there was something sincere about him. He treated her like a child, but he was fond of her in his complacent way. He had stood so dubiously there trying to say what he did . . . had been afraid to hurt her perhaps. He had not hurt her. He had made her angry. Angry, angry, angry, with him, and all men. Why could not they leave her alone? She did not want all these interferences. She wanted to look after her son, not to be shown off. She was sick of it all. Sick to death. To death, do you hear, to death. She would like death if it were not for Bruce. Muddled thoughts . . . lovely faces . . . proprietary men. . . . Oh, damnation, what could she do? Why had no one warned her that life was to be like this, back in her arid girlhood in Smetham? They had told her it was wonderful, full of adventure, of that eclipsing thing they called Love. And it had scarcely given her a glimpse of anything beyond hungriness and craving . . . hungriness and craving—for she knew not what. She could not stand very much more.

What was the use of all the pain and the tribulation? She had suffered and schemed and craved to bring a boy into the world and secure his life. And perhaps his life would be no better than hers. Perhaps he would have no emotion sweeter than this insatiable, watchful, hungry love for some creature who could probably get on without it. Perhaps he would only feel the least joy second-hand, as she did. Why, then, had she done it? Suffered the banality of marriage with Sir Eustace?

No—he would and more. Men did. Men lived on women's love. Basked in it. Triumphed through it. Took it for granted. And yet could live without it.

But "look your best"—it was not, was not . . . respectable. A wife who could be told that was not respectable. It was the sort of remark that made Eileen seem right after all. Perhaps Eileen was right after all.

The car was starting from the door below. Tito, Julio, Lindita. They were probably talking about her and Bruce at this minute, those Argentines. It was her fault for starting this. And yet as she looked back it still seemed inevitable. Each single step she had taken seemed inevitable. Her marriage . . . well, it had given her Bruce. Her going to live with Tito. . . . What else could she have done when Geoffrey behaved like that? Anything might have happened. . . . Her return to Geoffrey—the boy could not be kept away from his father. Her coming home to England, those grey years in Smetham. . . . Finally, most inevitable of all, her marriage with Tito. . . . What else, in any of the circumstances of her life, could she have done? . . .

CHAPTER XX

BRUCE

THE dining-room was very quiet. Bruce had been chattering all through the meal, but now that he was quite alone with his mother, he felt that something was urging him to earnestness, as though the hush about them in the room was waiting for him to break it. A wood fire crackled behind them expectantly, otherwise, for perhaps half a minute, there had been no sound. The warm brownness of the room, the panelling grown mellow and seeming almost to close about them, to envelop them, the long refectory table spangled with the colour of two dishes of fruit, the rich shaded light—it seemed to him to make an atmosphere pregnant with confidences. And he must talk.

His mother looked brilliant as she sat, lost in Tito's big chair, at the head of the table. She wore a blue-and-silver dress, and her lustrous dark hair above the small delicate face, the whiteness and lightness and sparkle of her, made him think, as he looked shyly across, that she had something in common with Lindita. They both had those demure lips, those large pool-like eyes. . . .

But before he could break the silence, she stood up. "Let's go into the little room," she said.

Bruce, buttoning his dinner-jacket, rose and opened the door for her. She led the way through to a room beyond the hall, unpanelled, distempered in Adam green. It was not often used, but there was a fire there tonight. "Phew! Hot in here," said Bruce.

"Open a window, dear, and ring for coffee. It is warm today—but I thought it would be rather cosy to sit over a fire and talk."

Bruce was at the window. "Magnificent sky!" he said, thinking of his appointment later.

"Is it? And you've had such poor weather this last week. Now that you're going away I expect it will clear up."

Coffee was brought, and Bruce crossed to join her by the fire. He sank deep into the sofa by her side, watching her pour out. He took his coffee, sipped it absently, and put it down beside him. "Mother . . ." he said at last.

"Bruce," said Mary, smiling at his earnestness.

He took her hand in his, keeping it on the sofa beside him. "I've got something to tell you."

"Oh, you usually have."

"But this is something terribly important. Can't you guess what it is?"

"My dear boy, I've no idea!"

Bruce laughed a little nervously. "Funny Mother! Anything could go on under your nose and you would not see it. You're such a sweet soul yourself that you would never believe anything wrong of anyone—not that this is anything wrong, only you wouldn't."

There was perhaps a shadow of anxiety in the quick look she gave him. "What is it, Bruce?" she said.

"Well, I'll tell you." Then, as though aping shyness or ingenuousness, he brought it out slowly, with a sort of punctuating jerk to her hand between each word, and his eyes away from her. "Lindita—and I—are in love." Then quickly, "At least, I'm terribly in love with Lindita. I think she's the most adorable, darling girl. And I'm never going to change my mind." He smiled. "There. Now you know!"

He sat, serenely awaiting the pleasure or surprise that she would express. He felt shy of meeting her eyes, but kept his face turned to the fire, with the smile still on his lips as though he had forgotten it there. Suddenly he heard her say "Bruce!" and turned to her. She was white, and quivering. He had never seen her like this. Her eyes seemed to be dull, trying to focus themselves on

his, and her little lips had become loose as though she could not control them into speech. Bruce was frightened. He did not associate this with what he had just told her. He just thought she was ill.

"What's the matter, darling? What shall I do? Shall I get you something? Or ring? Tell me . . ."

She waved an unsteady hand, motioning him back to his seat. "It's all right," she said faintly. "I felt a little giddy. These headaches . . ."

He helped her over to the window, and she breathed in the cool sweet air of the October garden for a few moments. "I'm better," she murmured at last.

"That's right. You frightened me, darling. It's this room, I expect. Too hot!"

"No, no!" said Mary. "Let's go back to the fire." She shivered a little. "I'm all right now."

They sat silently awhile, then Mary said in a quiet, stretched voice, "What were you saying, Bruce dear?"

Bruce coloured. "Oh," he said, "I was telling you about Lindita and me."

She did not answer for a moment, then she asked, "What did you mean, Bruce?"

"Darling—that I'm in love with her. . . ."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Oh, I know what you're going to say. We're young and everything. But I don't see that matters."

"It's not that, Bruce. . . . You're not really in earnest . . . not really?"

"But why not? And what's the matter? I thought you'd be delighted to hear . . ."

"Did you?"

He could see a far-away despairing look in her eyes. He was quite at a loss. "Rather!" he said. "I told Lindita today I should tell you. I thought you had an idea that it had happened."

"But . . . how could I have? You were always together, with Julio. I knew you liked her—but I thought you were . . . like you were in South America . . . brother and sister, you know. I expect really that's

all it is you feel. Fond of her like a brother. You've mistaken it for love."

Bruce shook his head. "No. It's not that," he said. "I know."

Again Mary was silent. At last, as though she had suddenly made a determination, she turned to him. "Bruce," she said, "you must put this out of your mind now and for ever. You must never allow yourself to think of it again. When you go up to Oxford tomorrow you must go without ever thinking again of this. . . ."

"But, Mother, what on earth do you mean? You can't possibly understand. It's . . . a real love. It's serious."

Bruce was stupefied. He had been prepared for restrictions, for a temporary separation even, but that his mother should talk like this—about "for ever" and everything—seemed to him simply a misunderstanding. She must think he was just half joking. But she went on in that low, strained voice, as though every word had to be sought for, and enunciated with difficulty. And the words seemed to him, when they came, quite foreign to her. He had never known her so slow to comprehend his feelings.

"I understand, Bruce. I'm beginning to understand. At least I've got far enough to wonder that I've never seen it before. But now that you have told me, dear boy, it must all end. I am glad that you have told me now, before it is too late. . . ."

"Oh, but it is too late. We're not children now, Mother; you can't just forbid it like that. Besides, I can't think what in the world can put you against our being in love. . . . We both thought you'd be delighted. I was excited about telling you." He paused, watching her anxious face. "What reason *can* you have?"

Again he heard the voice which did not seem to come from her at all, but from someone half pleading, half determined, who was speaking for her. "You know that you mean more to me than anything," it said. "I can't give you any reasons. I can only ask you to trust me,

and to promise now that you'll never think of this again."

"I can't promise you that. I wouldn't if I could; I tell you I'm really in love." He spoke almost sharply. He was hurt and impatient that his mother should be so . . . obstinate. He had *told* her he was in love. Why could she not believe him? Why did she talk in that distant way of "not thinking of it again".

Then he heard her say, "Bruce, I beg of you. . . ." And he turned to her again. Her eyes were full of tears, she was not ordinarily distressed. He could see that something overwhelming was happening to her. But it was almost sulkily that he wondered what, in the fact of his being in love with Lindita, could have affected her in this way.

"Tell me," said Bruce, "why are you so upset by this?"

She vaguely shook her head. "Bruce, Bruce, my darling boy, I beg of you . . . as I have never begged anything, to forget this. . . ." He felt as she said it that she knew he would not obey. She begged, but quite dispiritedly, as though hopeless of his listening.

He began again, more gently. "But, Mother, you must see that I can't do that. You see, you don't even give me a reason. . . ."

That seemed to stir her. She stood up. "Don't ask me to do that," she said.

"Why not?"

She answered quickly. "Because it would spoil your life. Now listen. You're eighteen. You've got everything before you. Just for the sake of what you imagine to be a tremendous love now, but which won't seem so later. . . ."

"You mustn't say that, darling. You don't know."

Mary sat down again. "It's no use trying to persuade you," she said. "You won't trust me. . . ."

"Of course I trust you. Only"—he spoke as decisively as he could—"only it's no use your trying to get me to forget Lindita. I never shall."

As yet he was not greatly stirred. During the last

weeks he had grown accustomed to "queer" behaviour from his mother. He could see that she was unnerved and distressed, but so often had some trivial circumstance made her so that he had not yet grasped that anything appalling to himself lay behind it. If anything, he felt for once a little unsympathetic. She was so obstinate in not understanding that it was a life-and-death matter, not something to be dismissed with a prohibition to go farther. But when she "begged" him, spoke of "spoiling his life", he grew agitated, questioning whether her recent neurasthenia—as the doctor had called it—had some obscure but forbidding relationship to his love for Lindita. She was so very much in earnest. And she hinted at some secret reason. He began to be alarmed.

"Anyway," he said at last, not brusquely, but with a touch of peremptoriness in his voice, "if there is anything to keep us apart, I think you ought to tell me now."

CHAPTER XXI

MARY

MARY was aware of the window open behind her, and the wet autumnal smell of the garden wandering into the little room. She was aware of Bruce's face, curiously hard and insistent before her, and she was aware in a tangled, distraught way that the crisis of all her fears, all her lovely doubts and nervous premonitions, had suddenly been reached. She felt a curious sense of impotence to cope longer with it all—it had gone beyond her. There was no more hope . . . it was no longer possible to save them.

A breeze came up through the garden, and through the window, stirring a blind. She could feel that. She knew that. There was a magnificent sky, he had said. He was watching her. Waiting for something. Her explanation. And she thought, oh, God—what blind spots in our love! She had watched them go off together a hundred times. Three children . . .

Breeze in the autumn garden, but she had thought it would be cosy to sit over a fire tonight. . . . Oxford tomorrow. And she had never thought of that. Everything else under the sun she had thought of—an accident in the car, a dozen illnesses—but not that. Why hadn't they taken the coffee things away? But that—the one thing . . . What a fool the boy was. She had told him to drop it and he wouldn't. He thought it was life everlasting amen. He thought he really loved her. And for this sort of damned quixotry he was going to ruin . . . everything.

"Anyway"—he was speaking again—"anyway, we're meeting tonight. At midnight. I'm going to take her

for a run." Why say that? To make her tell him? She would. That forced her.

Mary began to speak very slowly, quite calmly, without preamble. Coherence came to her, and a queer calm in which to tell the story. "Your father was a hopeless drunkard, who eventually went to hospital with delirium tremens. . . ." How many times in the past months had she rehearsed this story against the impossible time when she would have to tell it to him? And now it came out from deep inside her and she was scarcely conscious of speaking, or of his one broken cry when she began. "Mother!" he said—but she did not see his fierce, half-incredulous face. She felt suddenly estranged from him, concentrating furiously on telling her story. "When you were about a year old he tried to kick your cradle over and I saved your life. After that I thought it unwise to remain with him, so I went to the only friend I had, who was Tito Montéz. I lived with him for two years. While I lived with him I bore him a child—Lindita."

Serve him right, making her tell him this. Serve him right! What was he saying? Something about untrue. But he knew it was true.

"Quite true," said Mary.

That sunset she saw with Eileen off Margate pier. She tried all the slot machines and Eileen saved her pennies. But they both saw the sunset. Her boy hasn't fallen in love for ever and ever with his sister. She hasn't got to tell him about herself, and he's never thought she was Joan of Arc, Vierge Marie, Godiva, and Desdemona . . . rather sweet and pathetic.

He wanted more. What more? To hear more. All for him. She couldn't tell him. All for him, everything for his sake. "Your father went to hospital and came out. So I took you back to him. I thought an English father . . . then the war broke out and he was killed. . . ."

She was aware that he was standing over her. "He was killed fighting!" he said. "A fine death. And you left him. . . ."

She could not argue. She could not say it was unjust. She saw Bruce stand over her a moment, then sink back in another chair—not beside her. When she perceived that, she burst into tears. Like a drunken woman who realizes through an alcoholic mist that all the sorrows from the beginning of the world are gathered together in her, but has no idea why, Mary, seeing her son sit in a separate chair, broke into long, violent, convulsive sobs.

CHAPTER XXII

BRUCE

BRUCE undid the studs of his stiff shirt and laid his hot hand on his heart. He was hardly conscious that he did this, or of the thumping that he felt there, or of the bodily dizziness that came from it. He was hardly conscious of anything fully.

The story his mother had begun to tell at first seemed monstrous. His father till then had been as real to him as anyone he had known in flesh and blood. A hopeless drunkard. And his mother! His mother who had been for him like the statue of Our Lady in the Jesuit chapel, a beautiful immaculate mother. . . . And what she told him was true. It was true that she had left his father to live with Tito. . . .

Before he could grasp the significance of it to him and Lindita came the shock of being, as it seemed, orphaned by what she said.

Then came the seemingly incongruous thought of Lindita, waiting and waiting for him to come tonight . . . for of course he would never see her again. . . .

Agonizingly he looked back to the weeping figure of his mother, and he was abruptly without pity. He felt that in some way he must comfort her . . . but he could not. He did not know her. She was not his mother. Not the lovely lady with whom he had been sitting.

Her handkerchief had fallen to the floor and he picked it up silently and handed it to her. Her small fingers left her wet cheeks for a moment to grasp it. But she went on crying, unconscious of him beside her.

He had no vision of it all from his mother's side, he saw only his own tragedy. He could never speak to

Lindita again. It was somehow his mother's fault. He had been wronged . . . tricked. . . . The room became unendurable. He felt that at all costs he must get away for a time—get out into the night, be alone, think. He felt shamed and unclean. "I'm going out," he said. But she did not seem to hear. "I'm going into the garden for a few minutes. I'll come back."

He flung out of the front door and stood on the gravel outside in the still dampness of the night. Again silence. Nothing seemed awake or astir about him, except his mother in the room behind. It was as though they two were left alone on the earth, all life gone out everywhere, and they so torn by wretchedness that they could not die. Through this night he was to have taken his love—and she was no more. He must never see her again. Under this florid speckled sky, under the shadow of these skinny trees, they were to have crept out together, and to have been alone for him to talk what nonsense he pleased.

He scarcely faced the actual reason of their separation. He was frightened to his very soul by the unnaturalness of it. He dared not contemplate the fact that he had unconsciously been loving his sister. God, it was hideous. The thought was grinning and grotesque. Surely they ought to have known somehow. Surely Nature herself had some precautions . . .

What now, then—what now? There was only one thing to be done—he must get away. He pushed his hands deep into his pockets, and walked down the drive a little while. He must get out of this unnatural situation at once. He must get away before Tito and Julio and Lindita returned. He could not bear to see her. There was something disgusting to him in it . . . as though he had found she was a boy. How *could* such a thing have happened to him?

If any tolerance or understanding would have helped him through, if he could have seen anything humorous or escapable about it, he might have saved himself the agony. But the normality of him was shaken and

shocked beyond any repair that mere thought could make. He had desired her . . . and she was his half-sister . . . and the thing appalled him.

He must escape from them all. There was only one thing to do for the moment—go back to Smetham. He would get a job. He would work for himself. But tomorrow he would have his friends. He would talk to them. The Mouse would understand. Smetham was the only place for him to go to.

And his mother? He could do no more. She had betrayed him. He was sorry for her, but he did not love her now. She would have her daughter still. She would have to get on without him—for a time, anyhow. Deliberately he reasoned against that. His mother had sacrificed herself for him. She had done a great thing for him. For him, perhaps, she had married Tito . . . but what was the good of reason? There might be every reason in the world why he should love his mother still, but he just did not love her any longer, and logic could not help. He must get away now. Perhaps some time in the future he might be able to be with his mother again, might respect her . . . might love her . . . but not tonight. He did not understand why—but he knew that he did not love her now.

He had come half-way down the drive and turned back. It was cold. The house itself looked desolate from here, and the trees, dripping gloomily around him, were no longer friendly. This pleasant life, this house and all it had meant to him, must be forgotten. . . .

He was rather proud of the decision. He felt he was giving up something immense for the sake of something immense—understanding neither fully. Perhaps that was why he had chosen Smetham—a sort of atonement by suffering. That ghastly place after this. . . . It would cleanse him in some way to sacrifice this easy happiness.

But he was full of such half-formed thoughts. He did not understand. His mother had left his father . . . that was cruelly clear. Had lived with Tito. Had slept with Tito—then . . . a girl of twenty. Sex. Sex between

them, God! How beastly! His adorable mother giving herself! But why beastly? Why? She had married him now. Oh, he didn't know why. At twenty, to leave his father. But his father was a drunkard. Yes, yes, but to have borne Lindita to Tito. . . .

All he knew clearly was that his life was distorted. All he knew was that he must get away from this house. Escape his mother . . . Tito . . . Julio . . . Lindita—the whole unnatural business. Must go back to Smetham, sound and sensible ugly Smetham. Respectable Aunt Eileen. There were no awful secrets in that family. . . . He would know where he was again, and presently know what to do.

He would go at once. He would tell his mother and set off at once for Smetham. Before the other three returned. He must *do* something. He would pack a bag and get away within quarter of an hour. It was the only thing—before . . . he could not see her again.

He came back to the little green room. His mother was still sitting before the fire, no longer crying. She looked up at him at once as he came in. And suddenly Bruce thought there was something . . . something almost whorish about her. The illusion of her sanctity once gone, he thought, looking at her, the big diamonds that Tito loved, the beautiful dress, the tearful eyes guarded now and anxious no longer, just distressed—she looked . . . artificial.

"Mother," he said, "I'm going. I'm going to leave at once."

CHAPTER XXIII

MARY

But Mary was ready for that. She had regained a precarious lucidity. For a time she was prepared to put up a desperate defence. Gathering all the resources that her wavering senses had left her, she was controlled and unnaturally calm. "Sit down, Bruce," she said. He obeyed.

"You want to leave here tonight ?"

"Yes. I must. At once."

His mouth was set. No use appealing. All her instincts showed Mary that. His normal selfish soul had been shocked out of all love for her for the time. She had no chance of winning him back. She must go very carefully. "Why ?" she asked.

"You must see. I can't meet Lindita again."

"No. Perhaps not. But she's going back to Argentina soon. Before you get back from Oxford."

"I'm not going up to Oxford."

"Why not, Bruce ?"

"I'm going to get on on my own. Earn my own living."

He would not look at her. He kept his hands obstinately in his pockets and his eyes down.

"But, Bruce, you'll get over this. You'll go up to Oxford tomorrow and forget all about it in time. . . ."

"Oh, what's the good of arguing ?" His voice was angry and impatient. "How can I ever forget about it ? I want to start all over again—a new shot at life."

"Yes, Bruce ; I see." She knew that she must remain reasonable. "But there's no reason why you should not do that at Oxford. It will all be new to you. . . ."

"Well, if you want to know, I don't want to live any more on Tito. I want to start on my own."

Suddenly all Mary's defences went down. "*You* want. *You* want. But what about me? Don't you realize . . ." She stopped. He had sighed impatiently, rather cruelly.

"Bruce, you must understand. It was all for your sake. I did everything from the beginning out of love for you. You're not going to turn round on me now? You're not going to leave me?"

"It's too late to start thinking of that. I don't know how I feel. I only know that I must get away and think this out. It's knocked me over. I can't help it. I don't want to be unkind, but I must clear out now. . . ."

"But don't you see, you're giving up all your opportunities? I've done so much to get you your chance. For your own sake, Bruce, for your own sake. . . ."

"I tell you I can't take anything more from Tito."

"Bruce—don't you love me any more?"

She watched his hardened face. "I don't know," he said at last. "I don't know. I suppose when I've got used to it . . ."

"You're cruel! You're cold and selfish and cruel! You only think of yourself. All your life I've never had another thought but your welfare, your future. I worked for you. I sacrificed myself for you. For two years in that awful town I lived in absolute squalor for your sake, as you very well know. I married Tito for your sake. It's no good your looking like that—I did! I did not love him—it was for you. And now you want to leave me."

"Don't, Mother. Please don't. You only make it worse."

"You're priggish! That's what you are, Bruce. You're . . ." She could not say any more. She was losing him. . . . At last she asked where he was going.

"Smetham," said Bruce.

"To Eileen's?"

"Yes." Oh, well, what did it matter now what Eileen

thought ? If it was all over it did not matter that Eileen knew. Eileen would smirk and say she always said no good could come of it. . . .

Then the injustice of his attitude overcame Mary. Her son, her own boy, was going to leave her and go to her sister. It was treacherous. She and Bruce had been friends—had laughed about Eileen. And he meant to leave her and go to that place, that house . . . he would rather return to Smetham than stay with her. . . .

"Bruce," she said lifelessly, "you'll break my heart !"

That moved him. She could see that he was moved by that. He caught her hand. "Look here, Mother, I'm sorry. I don't want to cause you pain. . . ." Cause her pain—as though this were a passing episode. Well, he was young. Everything's a passing episode when one's young—however awful it seems. It's only something that comes before the future. But she was not young. There was no future. "I don't want to hurt you. But this isn't a matter of how I feel about you. Or of right and wrong. Perhaps you've always been right. Perhaps I'm a coward. But you must see that I can't stay. I can't see Tito and Lindita again. I must get at things from a new angle. I dare say one day, when I've worked a bit, been on my own, I shall feel differently. I expect we shall be able to come together again. Be friends again. But I can't stay now. *Do* understand that, Mother . . ."

"I understand." She felt her own voice sullen and low.

"I must go and get my ideas straight. I shan't tell Aunt Eileen a thing—don't worry about that. I'll just tell her I did not want to depend on Tito any more. I wanted to be on my own. And I don't suppose I'll stay there. . . ."

But Mary took no comfort from it. She could not think of a nebulous future in which they "might come together again". She realized only that he was leaving her. That nothing she could say or do would restrain him. She had lost him.

"I'll do my best," he went on. "I'll promise to do my best to get over it. I know you've done a lot for me . . ." Done a lot! That was almost funny. He could hold her hand and talk calmly of her having done a lot for him. Was there no end to his egotism? "But now I must go. They may get back any minute. I can't see her again. . . ."

"But, Bruce"—wearily she tried once more—"it can't have been so very deep. She's only a child. You're still a schoolboy, really . . . Are you going to ruin everything just . . ."

"Don't talk about it! Don't say any more. I've done all I can. I've promised to try. Some day, I expect . . ."

She felt her hand dropped; saw his troubled, impatient face, knew he was aching to be gone. He looked strong and handsome. He was capable of setting out afresh. She could see him striding on—taking up a new life. Whatever happened to her it would not ultimately hold him back. For she had succoured him and trained him to be this fine and fearless and selfish youth, she herself had taught him to trample down anything in his way, and he was brushing past her . . . it was she herself who would be left behind when he climbed. . . .

"Bruce," she said, "if you leave me now . . ." she spoke quite steadily, watching his averted face—"if you leave me now there won't be another chance"—she scarcely knew what she meant—"there won't be any some day for us, if you go away now. . . ."

PART THREE

And After That

CHAPTER XXIV

BRUCE

He scarcely heard her last words. He wanted to get out of the room—out of the house. She had moved away from the door and returned to her seat by the fire; he saw her as he hurried out, her hands folded on her knees, looking fixedly into the grate. He rushed upstairs.

Now that he had once made the decision and begun to act, everything was easier. So long as he could be doing something! It was sitting still, arguing, in that room, that had been unendurable.

He ran up the stairs of his own flat and burst into the bedroom. Emilio was on the floor, finishing the packing of his things for next day. "I'm leaving at once," Bruce said shortly.

"*Señor*—tonight?"

"Yes, I want you to come with me to Smetham and drive the car back. Have you packed?"

"*Si, señor.* In these bags your immediate things. In the two trunks the rest."

"Well, put those bags in my car—quickly."

He stood impatiently watching the Argentine pack the pyjamas that were laid out for him, and a few necessities. And when Emilio had left him he did not hesitate. He scarcely glanced round his rooms. He pulled on a heavy grey coat, picked up his hat, and hurried downstairs.

He could hear the Bentley outside the front door. He hesitated for a moment outside the door of the little green room where his mother was. But he could not go in. It was too painful. As soon as he could he would see her again. But no more tonight. "Good-bye, Mother!" he called, but there was no answer.

"Will you drive, *Señor* ?"

"Yes," said Bruce. For the last time, he thought, as he sank down behind the wheel. . . . But when the car was twenty yards from the house he glanced back and caught a last glimpse of his mother. She was standing on the wide step, her thin blue dress blown sideways by the wind. Should he go back ? Stop ? Oh, hell, what was the use ? More argument, another "scene". He could not change his mind now. And Tito might be home at any minute. He waved, but realized that she probably could not see it. Then he shot down the drive at a wild speed.

He was sorely tempted to keep the car. After all it was his, and he loved it. But if he could keep the car he could go to Oxford. He had forsworn Tito, and all Tito could do for him. He had put the idea of wealth back where he found it. He must send the Bentley back with Emilio tonight. But one last drive !

Bruce had always driven at a foolish speed—but this time he surpassed himself. He could see Emilio gripping the door of the car beside him. He made the great engine hum up hills, his headlights flaring far down the road in front. He drove sadistically, careless of other traffic. It was the last time he would have this power under his foot . . . very well, then. . . .

The concentration it needed was a relief to him. He felt guilty in a way. The small pathetic figure of his mother on the steps haunted him as he came farther and farther away. And yet, he justified himself, yet what else could he have done ? Seen Lindita again ? No—he would not let his mind go that way. That way led to destruction. . . .

What would Aunt Eileen say ? In her way, delighted. So pleased that it had not answered. So pleased that Bruce had turned to her. . . . All of them questioning, eager, vulgarly inquisitive. . . . Tomorrow he would see the Mouse. The Mouse would know what to do. Then perhaps leave Smetham.

Bruce-like, he began to make plans. His nature was

such that even at such a time he could not be with a void in front of him. He would go up to London, he thought, get work where there would be cars, get a job in a garage —anything. Be on his own. Independent. No one to do things for him. For a moment he felt something like nausea at the idea of the last few months . . . Emilio working for him . . . he was sick of being pampered. He would work now—show that he could work. Perhaps in London, perhaps in Smetham. He would see.

And when he was free, his own master, he would see his mother again. Starting anew they might become friends once more. If he could only get over that feeling of revulsion at the unnaturalness of it all. . . .

They were tearing headlong up a wide main road. He overtook a lorry and missed an oncoming Daimler by inches.

"*Señor*," cried Emilio, "*por Diós, cuidado!*"

"All right, Emilio," said Bruce, "I won't kill you; or myself. We're nearly there."

"Thank God," said Emilio.

They had a few miles more on this road before they turned into a narrower one. Speed! He'd forget that way. The arrogant feeling that his wheels beat down the road, gripped over the road like claws of lightning, overcame the road . . . the peril of passing car after car wherever they might be as he approached from behind, the skill of a brilliant swerve back into his own part of the road . . . it intoxicated him. If he could go on for ever like this . . . drive on without a destination . . . the car was almost "all out" now. It was sheer madness to keep his foot jammed down. But just for this one lap—this last burst of speed. . . .

Slowly, regretfully, he began to ease his foot. Very gently the speedometer needle dropped back, though he seemed still to be passing traffic indiscriminately. By the time that he was approaching the corner where he must turn left for Smetham they were going easily. He swung the car round.

"No more, *Señor*!" begged Emilio.

"All right," said Bruce. They were approaching Smetham now, and he went slowly, beginning to consider in his mind what he should say to Aunt Eileen. This was the road he had liked least of all when he had tried to walk out of the town. It led him past cement factories and tall chimneys which the Mouse called priapic, and which scarred the line of the river. Soon he would be in Spleen, the first suburb of Greycaster.

These bloody towns again, he thought, letting the car drag silently along the roadside. Not thirty miles behind lay his lovely Kent. Penshurst, Plaxtol, Weald, and Mereworth—how he had reeled off to Lindita the names of its villages! Not thirty miles behind—but he was sending the car back, burning his boats almost literally. And ahead lay those smug, uncompromising towns, and he had decided to return—to Burnley Road, Uncle Robert, Arthur Groom. . . .

Lindita would be waiting soon. Or would they tell her he had gone? Forget Lindita. Forget that it was with her he was to have driven tonight, with her up River Hill, through sleeping Sevenoaks, by Westerham and Edenbridge, anywhere among tall, kindly trees, with a rabbit perhaps to come out in the headlight of the car and run half a mile before them . . . forget that.

He turned the corner into the High Street, which began here in Spleen and went drearily right through to Smetham. A malodorous brewery, and the first hard grating of the trams—he was back again, sure enough. Lights in the houses were already out, and the hurrying figures scarce on the footpaths. It was sinister, he thought, sinister and smelly. Why was he returning? What had brought him back? To see the Mouse. But there was something else. Something that he was vaguely looking forward to. . . .

He crossed the bridge with its ugly painted iron-work and tram-lines, passed the "Old Cow", the Cathedral—the whole street deserted and lugubriously half-lit with high lamps. Sadly he drove down the dividing road to Smetham, so slowly that he caught the familiar smell of

fried fish across the pavement. God! How he loathed this somnolent road! It was the first time he had come through it since that afternoon in April when he had gone triumphantly forth to his new home.

Up to the right, and at last into the beginning of Burnley Road. Here they all were, the stupid, smudgy houses, here they all waited as though nothing had happened since he was here before. Square and similar, silent. . . . He supposed the family was in its appointed villa, its chosen brickwork box. He would not drive the car right up to the door. He knew that would mean the inquisitive face of Aunt Eileen between the blinds. He stopped a dozen yards away.

"Wait here," he said to Emilio, and walked up to the front gate. He opened it very slowly, remembering its familiar scream, and not wishing to be observed in approaching. As he mounted the three stone steps he could see chinks of strong yellow light glaring behind the curtain. That meant that they were in the drawing-room. He stood listening. A peal of laughter rose. How plainly he remembered the sickening sound of Tom's laugh!

What had brought him here? Bruce remained still, the bell not yet rung, and faced that question squarely. It was not yet too late to drive away. Something had made him come to this house. Acutely conscious now of the weight of misery which he had almost succeeded in forgetting as he drove recklessly over, acutely conscious of a terrible need for sympathy, he suddenly realized, or admitted to himself, his reason. Paula, whose letters he had scarcely answered—it was some remote and half-conscious recollection of her that had brought him back to Burnley Road. She wouldn't understand, of course. He would not tell her the whole story. But that quaint, almost servile devotion of hers was what he wanted, what he needed, now.

Had he known? No—honestly, he had never actually thought of her till this minute. But it must have been that. Now that he knew she was behind those blinds

with the rest of them, he was certain of it. He reached up and rang the electric bell.

At once the laughter in the room on the right of the passage ceased. He could see through the coloured glass in the front door that the door into the drawing-room had been stealthily opened an inch, to make his words to Agnes, when she came, audible inside. He could see the guilty streak of yellow light plainly. That was Smetham!

He pulled his hat well over his eyes. Agnes appeared from the end of the passage. But she, too, had seen the streak of light. Bruce thought she gave a toss to her head, then closed it before opening the front door.

"Can I see Mrs. Craig?" he said.

"What name, sir?"

Bruce at once showed her that he did not want them to know who it was yet. "Agnes," he said quickly, "get hold of Mrs. Craig alone, will you?"

She recognized him and nodded sagely, then led him through to the dining-room. Bruce sat on a horsehair chair and waited, recognizing that onions had formed a staple part of the evening meal. He heard Aunt Eileen in the hall, mysterious and eager. "Where is he?"

"In the dining-room, m'm."

Aunt Eileen came in. "Bruce," she began at once, "whatever brings you here?"

"Aunt Eileen . . . could you put me up for a night or two? Till I get a job, I mean. . . ."

"Bruce! A job? Whatever's happened?"

Bruce kicked his foot unhappily. "Oh, I dunno. I can't get on with Tito. I want to be on my own. . . ."

"But . . . sit down, Bruce. What does your mother say? I knew it would never do. Does she know you've come here?"

"Yes, I told her."

"Well, I never! It's very sudden to come away. I thought it was such a swanky place, and you going up to Oxford and all. And now you've come back to us. I must say it's queer."

"I was going up to Oxford. But I don't want to accept anything more from Tito."

"There! I knew he was no good! Taking a big house and that. Why, we even heard you'd got a motor-car of your own! Have you quarrelled with your mother, then?"

"No. Not exactly quarrelled. Of course she wanted me to go on. . . . Oh, please don't ask me any more questions, Aunt Eileen!"

"Poor boy! I'm not surprised you're upset. It was all very bad for you from beginning to end, and of course we knew no good could come of it. Was this foreign man . . . but I won't ask you any more about it tonight. You shall tell us everything in the morning when you've had a good night's sleep. He's not actually cruel to her, is he? But there, you need not say a word till tomorrow. Have you brought any things?"

"I've got two suit-cases in the car. I'll tell Em—— I'll bring them in."

"Well, we've got a little party this evening. Nothing much, you know. Just Arthur and his sister have come round. We've been laughing so much I feel quite giddy. They'll be so pleased to see you again. You run and get your bag. I'll tell them you're here."

"Oh, Aunt Eileen, couldn't I just slip quietly up to bed tonight? I'm so——"

"Now, Bruce," she chuckled kindly, "none of your old tricks tonight. It will do you good after all you've gone through to see them again. Run along, now. . . ."

Sick at heart, he went back to the car. He had not anticipated this. He had thought of Aunt Eileen, of course, knew he would have to give an account of himself to her and Uncle Robert tonight, but Groom . . . Tom. . . . Well, it was his own choice.

"Emilio—give me those bags, will you? And take the car back. Look here"—he fumbled in his pocket for some notes—"take this. I shan't see you again."

"You won't? But, *Señor* . . ."

"Give me those bags. And look here . . . tell the

señora I'll write tomorrow. Tell her not to worry. See ?"

Before Emilio could answer Bruce was conscious of the front door up the road being opened, and turned to see Arthur Groom and Tom bearing down on him.

"There he is !" shouted Tom, and they clattered down the road. "Hullo, old sportsman !"

Arthur Groom looked at the car. "Our millionaire," he said. "Bruce, this is what I call a car ! How are you, me lad ?"

They pulled at his hand enthusiastically. Bruce tried to answer, conscious of the amazement of Emilio.

"Well, well, well," said Arthur Groom. "Home is the sailor, home from the sea, as they say. And after all this time !" He imitated a stage sob.

Tom said, "Shut up, Arthur, give the chap a chance."

Bruce turned to Emilio. "All right," he said, "you can get back."

The three of them stood beside the bags watching Emilio start up and continue up the road. Bruce kept his eyes on the little red rear light of his car affectionately till it disappeared round a bend, then picked up one of his bags. Tom carried the other.

They led him into the drawing-room, and while Bruce was greeting Uncle Robert and Paula, Arthur Groom sat down at the yellow-keyed piano and banged out "See the Conquering Hero Comes", at which they all laughed. When he was able to sink fairly obscurely into a seat he looked shyly across at Paula. She seemed to him to have changed. She was older. Dressed as though she were older. Had filled out more ; looked more independent among them. But his attention was soon brought back to Arthur Groom, who was already telling a story about an American. Then he noticed that Aunt Eileen and Uncle Robert were conversing deeply in a corner. Wondering how long he would stay, he supposed. He could tell them at once. Not long.

Paula scarcely seemed to have noticed him. How different from Lindita she looked. Lindita, dark and imperious, Paula fair and shy. Forget Lindita. What

was she doing now? Had she heard? Forget Lindita. His mother had told Tito. His mother would soon have his message. Tomorrow he would write. How upset she had been! Well, naturally. It was awful. Awful for him, too. But they would get over it. He would see her again soon. Why had he said he did not know if he loved her? He did love her. Of course he did. Only just at first, when she first told him. . . .

Uncle Robert approached gingerly, his conference with Aunt Eileen done. "Bruce," he said, "would you like a drink? I've no whisky in the house," he added hastily, "but there's beer, or some port."

Bruce felt parched. "I'd love a glass of beer," he said.

Robert went to get it. Oh, they were not so bad, all of them. They were kind, after all. And he would never again feel as he had on the day he hit Arthur Groom in the face. Something had happened to him since then. Something that made it easier to endure them all.

He drank his beer gratefully. Arthur Groom said something about his supposing that Bruce had lived on champagne. Bruce smiled.

At last the three guests got up to go. Tom and Paula showed them out, and as though in tacit understanding did not return to the drawing-room. Bruce knew what he was in for then.

Uncle Robert coughed importantly. "Your aunt has told me the state of things, Bruce. Of course it is only what might be expected."

Bruce waited.

Aunt Eileen said, "Robert dear, we won't bother Bruce with anything tonight. He's so tired. I've told Agnes to make you up a bed in the little room next to Tom, Bruce."

"You will be welcome to remain here," said Uncle Robert, "while you are . . . arranging matters, my boy."

"Thank you," said Bruce; and they went upstairs. He was tired now, dog tired. Whatever happened, he could think no more. All he wanted to do was to sleep.

Tomorrow would be time enough to make plans. With weary, nervous alacrity he pulled off his clothes, found some pyjamas in his suit-case, and in a few moments was in bed. He pulled the sheets to his chin; clean sheets. "Then the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon smooth away trouble." At eighteen . . . after such a day . . . nothing could keep him awake. Thoughts of his mother, of the decisive thing he had done, of the possible future, blurred quickly into unconsciousness.

But he was awakened. He felt that he had slept for hours when he heard a soft tap on his door, and it was opened ajar to let in Paula's voice.

"Bruce, are you awake?"

"Yes. But——"

"Keep quiet. I want to speak to you." She moved very slowly, silently closing the door behind her.

"Look here, Paula, what on earth would your mother say?"

Paula answered unexpectedly. "Never mind that," she said.

Bruce sat up in bed rather startled. What in the world had happened to this girl? He lit a candle beside him, and saw her standing between his bed and the door, her short, fair hair untidy about her head, a pale silk dressing-gown round her, and a quiet, actually a quiet, confident smile on her lips.

"I say, you'd better sit down somewhere," he whispered at last. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. Well . . . look here, Bruce, I'm not going to ask you any questions, or anything. But I know there's something pretty serious wrong."

"How do you know?"

She frowned this away as unimportant. "I can *tell*," she said.

"Well?" said Bruce.

"Can I help?"

His old irritation with her plaintiveness returned for a moment.

"You? No," he said.

But she was not snubbed. "If I can," she said quietly, "tell me."

Bruce nodded.

"You see," went on Paula, "I understand you a little, Bruce."

Her big violet eyes were on him wisely. There was wisdom in her, he felt. She understood, she said. Well, women do. God knows how this girl even knew enough to come here. But she did. He did not want to tell her any more, though. She could not have guessed about Lindita. Then, looking at her again, Bruce said very softly: "Paula, it's awfully decent of you. I believe you do understand. Only you can't do anything."

"Righto, Bruce." She got up. "Only don't forget."

She hesitated beside his bed, then deliberately blew out his candle and crossed the room to leave him. At the door, in the darkness, she turned. "I love you, Bruce," she said. Then crept out and pulled the door after her.

This time Bruce did not so quickly go to sleep.

CHAPTER XXV

MARY

She too must go. Impossible to wait here for her husband, impossible to make explanations to a sympathetic Tito. She must leave as her son had left.

She did not return to the little green room. She stood for a moment irresolutely in the hall, numbed by her loss, not hysterical, cold and forlorn and numbed. He had left her, and, as she had said, there would be no "someday". She must hide before anyone found her ; anyone. Not to Bruce nor to Tito nor to Lindita could she talk any more. All she could do by talking she had done, and it had amounted to nothing—had not even delayed his going. So she would not explain any more, or hope, or try to conciliate ; she would conceal herself, and with herself all the agony of loss. She would get it underground ; stamp on it. Under the earth, under the night, lower than thoughts ran or the eyes of stars could see, beneath the last stratum of hope, she would bury it. . . .

She was dazed and her mind misty as she paused in the hall. She could not focus any thought on the immediate present, desiring only to descend, to go down somehow into a dark fastness where there would be no one to see. . . .

Then suddenly she was possessed of a desperate and deranged clarity—the quick cunning that is heightened by aberration. She realized that Tito would be on his way home already, and that if she were not to see him she would have to leave at once. He had his car with him, and Bruce had taken his Bentley. She must have a taxi.

She rang the bell. A sleepy servant came in. "Oh,

I want you to pack a suit-case for me and 'phone for a taxi. I am unexpectedly called away." The girl suppressed a gape and left her.

For a few moments she was unable to think what she should do next. Her hand went mechanically to her forehead, shielding the distended blankness of her eyes. By an effort she realized that she must go up and put on a coat. She climbed slowly upstairs, keeping her fingers on the handrail as though she might lose her way. In her bedroom she found the girl packing. Mary waved her back to the hand-bag when she tried to help her with her fur coat. Then she stood before the glass, automatically arranging her hair under her hat.

Then again she seemed to lose control of the confused thoughts in her mind. She gathered them up some time later, as it seemed to her, and doing so, thought that she had been speaking aloud.

"Did I say anything to you ?" she asked the servant behind her.

The girl looked up, amazed at the question. "Why, yes, madam ! You said it was a magnificent sky."

"Oh yes, so I did. Is that bag ready ?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just things for the night."

"That's right. Will you take it downstairs, and when the taxi comes put it in ?"

"Yes, ma'am." The girl looked perplexed and a little frightened. Mary was quite aware of this.

"You have telephoned for the taxi ?"

"Yes, ma'am. Allbury's, ma'am. They said they'd be up in ten minutes."

"Thank you." She watched her carry the bag from the room, untroubled by its heaviness. Then she went to the window, silently drew aside the curtain, and settled down to wait. All she was conscious of in those minutes was anxiety that her taxi's weak lights should appear in the drive before the long white horns of light that the Rolls threw before it. If Tito should come first she would be lost.

And the thought of Tito became horrifying to her, as

though he were some bestial, nightmarish figure preying on her. She felt as though she were a small wild animal about to be hunted by innumerable immense, carniverous Titos, with red-rimmed eyes pursuing her down the night. She must escape before he came. She must have a start. How could she hide from that threatening blood-hound spectre if she could not leave before he was here?

Abruptly her thoughts changed. Poor Tito! He was the real victim. She had become his wife without loving him, and now she was leaving him, though she liked him no less. He had done nothing to hurt her. And he would come home, tired, but jolly and kind, and find his wife fled, because her boy had fled. Find the house empty of the two happy people he had left behind. What would Tito do? Go back to Argentina, she supposed. Go back to his big villa and his army of aunts and take his son and daughter. But his boyish vanity would be hurt. He was the real victim, in a way.

But if he came home before she had left she could not bear it. She would scream, run down the passage, lock herself in Bruce's flat . . . she would . . . Steady. Keep calm. Get away before Tito comes and it will be all right.

No car yet. No lights round the bend. What a time that taxi took! They might have ordered someone quick. Tito would come first. She would never escape. She would . . .

Lights! But they were white and stretched a long way. She doubted a moment. Then opening the window she heard the engine. It was all right—the taxi. Thank God! She came down and spoke to the servant in the hall. "Tell Dr. Montéz," she said, "that both I and Mr. Bruce have been called away suddenly. I will write." Then she turned to the taxi-driver. "To the station!" she said.

So far she had no idea beyond escape. Bruce had known at once where he should go—to Eileen's. Sitting in the little smelly box of the country taxi, watching the elms of the drive flicker past the windows, Mary felt

unreasonably angry when she thought of Bruce going to Eileen. Going of his own choice to the very house from which she had extracted him. Making Eileen right, after all. Eileen, who had always been so careful, who was good and strict and religious, had won. Bruce had gone to Eileen. Left her and gone to Eileen. When he had first told her it had not seemed to matter. Now it was the most embittering fact of all.

They were jolting down the road now to the nearest main-line station. A flash of white headlights bore down on the taxi, and as the car behind it passed, Mary recognized the Rolls. Tito was returning. She was only just in time. The three of them were probably chattering in the back of the car, Spanish jokes, Spanish laughter. They would have one another still. They were one, really. One race, one family ; she and Bruce had never been more than strangers in their house. They would go back to their own country, Tito would lose a theme for sentimentalizing, but their life would not be greatly changed. He might never have come over to England that spring. The merest summer visit for him.

The taxi stopped. She got out and paid the driver, then wandered, rather bewildered, into the little booking-office.

"The up-train is just going out, ma'am," warned a ticket-collector.

"Up-train ?" repeated Mary.

"London."

"Oh ! . . ." London would do. Why, of course, London was the best place in which to lie hidden. You could remain in one of those great crowded areas of London like a rabbit in a burrow, quite forgotten, undisturbed, at peace. . . .

"Single to London," she said, through the pigeon-hole.

She found her bag in her own hand as she came down the steps. "Come along !" called somebody and she hurried on to the platform. A porter opened a door, she half stumbled in, and found herself alone in a third-class carriage. The engine began, slowly at first, then as it

gathered speed the wheels or something under her carriage beat out in even rhythm, as it seemed, the words of a song. "Of *all*—the *girls*—that *are*—so *smart*," said the mechanical beats, "There's *none*—like *pret*—ty *Sal*ly—She *is*—the *dar*—ling *of*—my *heart*"—all the way up to London, again and again—"And *she*—lives *in*—our *al*ley."

CHAPTER XXVI

BRUCE

"I SEE," said the Mouse, very thoughtfully puffing at his pipe, when Bruce had finished his long narration. "So you came away?"

Bruce broke out again. His words came from him with the passion of release. "Well, what could I do? Mouse, my dear chap, tell me, what else could I do?"

He turned a distressed face to his friend. They were sitting in the Castle Gardens, which held the usual Saturday afternoon scattering of strollers. It was nearly five o'clock and growing dusk, but they were unaware of it. And this was his most fervent appeal. He wanted terribly that the Mouse should tell him he had done the right thing. "You must see my point," he had repeated again and again as he had told his story, trying desperately to see his own point. And now he had appealed to the Mouse for judgment. "I don't see what else I could have done," he said again.

"No," said the Mouse at last, a little dryly, "I don't quite see what else *you* could have done."

"Exactly," he said quickly with infinite relief and missing the emphasis. "There was nothing. I had to come away. And I wanted to see you, so I came here."

"Mm."

"There's one other thing," said Bruce quietly, "and I hardly like to tell you that." He watched a couple of children rather despondently throwing grain to the pigeons as though it had been their only recreation for several years. "It happened last night, I'm afraid you will

think I'm the most awful swine. Well, I'll tell you, anyway. It was Paula."

"Paula ?"

"Yes. She came to my room. After everyone was asleep. She just said she understood, would like to help, and so on—of course she doesn't know the whole story. But that's not the point—what she said, I mean. It was what I felt. Mouse, d'you know, I think I'm in love with Paula !" Before the Mouse could speak he hurried on. "Oh, I know what you'll say. I've just told you about Lindita. I must be crazy, you think. Well, I can't help it. When she came into my room last night I had an extraordinary feeling. Quite different from how I used to think about Lindita. More—well, I suppose you'd say more carnal. It sounds awful. You don't mind my telling you all this ?"

"Go on."

"I must be a rotter, I think. After feeling as I did about Lindita. The same day ! But I couldn't help it. She stood at the end of my bed and looked absolutely lovely. Of course I didn't try to touch her. I wanted to like hell. But I'm not such a cad as that. You see . . . she's always felt like that for me. When I used to live here. You remember. But it used to bore me then. And last night, when all this had happened, I felt in a way that I'd like to see her again. At least, I didn't know I felt that. I just thought I'd come back to Smetham. But it must have been Paula. And now I . . . well, I only want her. Of course I can't think of Lindita . . . Oh, my God, Mouse, you must try to see what a *hell* of a mess it all is !"

"I see."

"Paula is beautiful, you know. And Lindita never really cared for me. She just thought I was idealizing her. But Paula's different. She thinks a devil of a lot of me. I dunno . . ."

"How old are you, Bruce ?"

"Eighteen. Well, eighteen and a half."

"Most people would tell you it didn't matter then—

about Paula and so on. They'd say you'd soon get over it, anyhow, at that age. I'm not altogether sure." The Mouse paused again.

Bruce was impatient. "Tell me, Mouse," he said, "what *am* I to do?"

"You must decide for yourself. As I see it . . ."

"Well?"

"Bruce, I may hurt you. I'm going to say just what I think."

"Fire away."

"Well, I don't think you're worth it, any of it. If I were sententious I should say that I don't think any man is worth what women do for him. But I don't mean that. I was thinking of your mother. Here you are, so immature that you leave her because of one girl, and fall in love, you say, with another the same evening. . . ."

"Oh, look here, that's not fair! I didn't leave her because of a girl. Only finding that Lindita was my half-sister . . . well, I was frightened. Besides, it was my mother too, you know. She's always seemed so marvellous to me. And last night, Mouse—I almost hated her for a time. I couldn't help it!"

"I dare say. But what I mean is, fancy anyone building so much on the constancy of you! Look what she's done. According to your own account look what your mother's done for you! When you were a kid out there. And since. D'you think she *liked* living in this place any more than you did? D'you think she enjoyed dishing out beer at the 'Old Cow'? But I'll guarantee she would rather have done that for ever than marry your stepfather."

"Mouse!"

"Just a minute. I told you I was going to say what I thought. Montéz was all right. Sound enough chap. But do you think anyone like your mother . . . anyone . . . delicate like that, wants to marry a man she doesn't love—when she's getting on for forty and lives her own life? D'you think his money meant anything to her, for her own sake? I suppose you see it as 'from barmaid

to millionairess' sort of touch. God! You were the only person of the whole lot of us who couldn't see that she didn't care a damn for Tito. And you couldn't see it because you've got a perfect instinct for self-content. You wanted to think she was in love so you *thought* she was. I don't mean that you consciously persuaded yourself. You didn't need to. As I say, you've got an instinct for these things. Anyway, that's what your mother's done for you. And then, because she's decent enough to tell you about Lindita, and you find she lived with Tito years ago, you get up on your little conventional high horse and walk out. You leave her to Montéz. I've no patience with you, Bruce."

Bruce said nothing. He had leant far forward in his seat, his eyes on the ground. At last he spoke. "I don't think that's fair," he said. "After all, Mouse, put yourself in my position. Supposing quite suddenly you were told something like that. Found you'd wanted . . . wanted something incestuous. What would you have done?"

The Mouse considered. "I suppose I might have done the same sort of damned hysterical thing as you did. But I shouldn't have tried to justify it next day. Especially if I'd imagined myself in love since then. I'd have damn' soon put it right somehow."

"Oh, it's all very well for you to talk. You can't imagine how I felt. Everything was different. I *had* to get out of that house."

"Well, perhaps I've put it a bit strongly against you, Bruce. You've been spoilt. That's what's wrong with you. It was the same at school. You were the kind of chap everyone did things for. I remember how Peter used to answer your name at call-over—which was a hell of a risk. Even the masters seemed to take more trouble with you. God knows why you're like that, but you are. And you'll always be the same."

"Not my fault."

"No—in a way it's your misfortune. And of course it tickled your curiosity when Lindita treated you as she did—with her sort of indifference. And of course it

'gets' you when Paula hero-worships you as she always has. I'm not surprised you wanted to get back to her last night, though I wouldn't mind betting you've scarcely thought of her for a year. You felt pretty crushed and ashamed last night, and it was that instinct of yours for self-content which brought you here."

"You think I'm absolutely to blame, then ?"

"No ; not really. All of us are. Your mother, even your aunt, Peter, I, that absurd tutor of yours—everyone who has spoilt you. You're vain, I think. And if you let the people who love you guide you, you can go through life in a perfect shell of self-satisfaction. You'll always find people who will adore you. Whatever you did there would be someone to tell you it's right. That's why your life's so dangerous. If you don't see for yourself when you've been a rotter you'll go on and on doing cheap things and getting praised for them. That's what I mean. There's nothing really exceptional about you, Bruce, as I've told you before, except that you are, whatever you do, a likable creature. And that's about all."

The Castle grounds had grown dark now and a slight wind had got up. Few figures were left along the asphalt paths. Bruce had a terrible sense of desolation. Not like the stinging pain of the night before. He felt now that he had got right to the bottom of it all, that he would never again feel any self-respect.

"But you'll go on," said the Mouse. "Whatever happens you're the kind that goes on. Look at you last night. Within an hour of renouncing one life you were planning another. Within three hours of losing one girl you had begun to be thrilled by a new one. You're practically invulnerable, you know."

"I'm not," said Bruce, and his voice was almost choking. "I'm not. I feel a cad."

The Mouse was moved at once. "Look here, I'm damn' sorry, Bruce. I did not mean to say a lot of rotten things. I know what you've been through. . . ."

"But you were right, Mouse. I——"

"It's our wretched generation," said the Mouse.

"We're born to suffer. Born into a disillusioned world, my Bruce. All of us. There's not a scrap of idealism anywhere about us—except of a second-hand, makeshift sort. What do they expect of us? There's not a cause worth serving. . . ."

But Bruce scarcely heard. "I shall write tonight," he said at last. "I shall write to my mother tonight. It's no good my going over there. I'll meet her somewhere. I'll tell her that I'll do whatever she wants—go up to Oxford after all, if she wants it. You're right, Mouse. She has been wonderful. Better than the silly idea I had of her being 'pure'. She called me a prig last night. Well, I was. I see now. What she did was finer in a way. Only at first, you see, when I first heard, and about my guv'nor, and everything . . . but you understand, Mouse. . . ."

The Mouse patted his arm. "Yes," he said, "I understand. You write tonight. Now, I promised Peter we'd meet him at the Star at six. We must get down there."

They left the windy Castle grounds and boarded a Smetham bus. "You don't really think too badly of me, Mouse?" Bruce said in his ear as they were jolted through the streets.

"No—silly ass! I've told you what I think. The whole thing's rotten. Just the sort of thing that happens in our world nowadays. But, as I say, you'll get over it. Even . . . if you never went back, you'd live it down all right. You're the sort that can live anything down. . . . Here we are."

They found Peter in the little private bar obscured by a crowd of rather offensively jocular naval officers. "What are you going to have?" he asked Bruce, as soon as they had shaken hands.

They took their beer into a corner. Peter asked no questions. Peter had no judgments to make. He had divined that there had been catastrophe and would have been rather embarrassed by details. But he was glad to see Bruce again.

"Seems strange to be back in this place," said Bruce. "I never thought I'd see Smetham again."

Peter grinned. "Well, it's managed to exist without you," he said.

Bruce was glad of Peter. Glad of his fat, honest face and his friendship. He felt in a way that in Peter's unquestioning sympathy was an answer to all the Mouse had said.

But he left them soon. "Must get up to Burnley Road," he said. "I've got a letter to write."

CHAPTER XXVII

MARY

MARY had stayed at that hotel to which she and Tito had gone before they had moved into Silliwake. She had left her bag there and gone out into the streets. Now it was nearing dusk and she had had nothing to eat.

She could remember little of the day. It seemed to her that she had walked and walked interminably to and fro through the same streets. She was conscious of being very tired. Of the night before little was left in her mind except a sense of utter loss. She had lost her son. That was all she clearly knew. If any one of the passers-by had stopped her and asked what was the matter, she would say she had lost her son and they would think she meant a child, and advise her to go to a police-station.

But of course none of the passers-by did stop her. She was too palpably a lady of "means and refinement", in her expensive fur coat, her small fashionable hat, her neat Parisian shoes . . . quite obviously a lady who had just come out from a matinée and had told the car to park while she did a little shopping. Once, for a moment, it seemed to Mary herself that this was so. Absurd! Why of course. What was *she* doing walking along here? The green Rolls Royce was just round the corner. She must get back to Silliwake and dress for dinner. Silliwake . . . then she remembered. She had come away. She and Bruce had gone flying out in different directions . . . each anxious to escape the return of the others. Funny that. She down the road—Bruce up. Running from Tito. She was hiding now. She had come to London to hide—that was it. But she was *so* tired.

This was Leicester Square. There was a garden there —like an Argentine *plaza*. She'd go in and sit down. She found an empty seat and sat vaguely watching a Frenchwoman call her dog. French . . . she had found this oasis too. It was probably as like home as anywhere in London, like a *place*. She was an exile. But Mary was not an exile. This was her town, the capital of her country. She had in some way come home. She had escaped from the alien arms of Tito, and reached her own seclusion. For here she was hidden. While she could sit still on this hard seat with the wrought-metal arm under her elbow, she was at peace.

It was not cold. Walking so long in her heavy coat had warmed her. And the lights in the street behind, the din and shouting of the Square, were infinitely distant. Here with the bust of William Shakespeare she was quite alone. Like a rock-pool. The sea roared out there beyond the gate, but where she was there was stillness and peace. Once she remembered as a girl looking down into a rock-pool. Quiet, dim colours round the clear water and a few fish too lazy to go out to sea with the tide. Here she was, under the rocks, then. And nobody would find her or ask her questions. . . .

Her mind was quiet now. All the delirious doubts were over. Only this sure and sleepy knowledge that there was nothing left to pursue, nothing now over which to guard, nothing more to fight. She had finished with all struggling. Bruce . . . Bruce had gone. He had left her in peace at last. She wondered no more about him—where he was or what he would do. It did not seem to matter now. After worrying so long it was blissful to feel that she need no longer care. He had left her behind, gone dauntlessly on as she had meant him to, gone to battle with his world alone. He would succeed. There was no doubt of that. She had seen it in the set lines of his face last night when he told her that he must "get on his own".

Mary smiled—a new, beautiful, unintelligent smile. With the cessation of normal thoughts, with the loss of

mental control, she had learnt a new love for Bruce. In a detached, selfless way she loved the youth who had left her to Tito. It was as though he had gone to chase the sun round the skies, oblivious of her far behind him ; and she stood, shielding her eyes with her hand, watching him go. But she was content to see his lithe form vanish. She had borne him and nourished him, given her life to secure his, and now she could see him leave her without a qualm.

Whether he had been cruel or foolish or wise, she no longer considered. It did not matter now. He had gone as he had had to go, and he would never return. So she was quite at peace.

But for how long ? Suddenly there was urgency in a thought. She had escaped Tito, but he would pursue her. He would know what had happened. Tito would find her. The road behind her where the shops were lit seemed threatening now. Tito was there. He would seek her out. London would soon be full of Titos, hunting her and hunting her till she was trapped. Then all her peace would be stolen. She would have to explain. He would take her back to Silliwake, to all that she had escaped. She would have to *think* again. If she could only have stayed here for ever in this little garden she would have been content. He would never find her here. But presently she would have to go back among the streets. And they were full of Titos.

She must find a more secure retreat. She could never remain hidden in London. They would come and take her, and drag her back to life and thought. She might even be confronted with Bruce. With the old Bruce who "did not know if he loved her any more", not that new brilliant visionary Bruce whom she loved as he went over the hills. She could not bear to go back. How, then, be sure of undisturbed repose ?

There was only one way. Why had not she seen it before ? It was simple and certain. She could die. It was easy to die, and then no one could break in on her thoughts. She would not have to hide or walk about or

be afraid of a street behind her. She would be carried away where none of them could come. That was it—death would be her retreat. No precariousness about that. Not like Silliwake. Surer even than a rock-pool, and more lasting.

Two men stopped just in front of her seat. "What's the time?" asked one.

"Twenty-five to seven."

Mary heard that. Twenty-five to seven. "At twenty-five to seven," she thought, "I decide to commit suicide." And she smiled.

She got up. No need to stay here any more. She had found a better place. She walked lightly now, her tiredness relieved. She left the garden and came out into the street. She did not mind the people—they no longer threatened her. They were in a different world to hers. She saw them as a ghost might see them—coming back to walk the streets among the talking crowds. A thin shower was falling gently, and umbrellas were going up about her. Mary looked vacantly but benignantly into the faces that passed. They seemed happy, going about their world. Running home like rabbits, popping up like rabbits for the evening's amusement. But she could watch them unperturbed as she went by.

But when she had gone up Wardour Street, along Shaftesbury Avenue, and objectlessly into Soho, she saw the first diners disappearing into restaurants. That made her unexpectedly indignant. People going to have dinner while she was going to die—it was preposterous. They wanted their food just the same. She . . .

"Beg your pardon." Somebody had bumped into her. She walked sharply on. The voice had frightened her. Perhaps there were Titos about, looking for her. She must not leave it too long. She must go soon to her new retreat.

And Bruce, what would Bruce say? But he was gone. He would not know what had happened behind him. If they told him he would be glad that she had found

such quietude. He did not really want her trying to follow him over the clouds. She could not help him any more, and he did not want a hanger-on. He wanted to run on with his wild hair blowing and his heart untroubled by her. By the name of a star, perhaps, or the name of a wind, he would be called. He would never come back. . . .

She had not yet thought of the significance of her plan, or even how she was going to effect it. Her mind was set contentedly on the restfulness it would bring her. She wondered what had made other people do this. She recalled things she had read in the papers, pathetic little notes to wives or children—"I am lonely"—"I am hungry"—"I am ill"—"the thought of my debts worries me". And all their reasons seemed trivial beside her own absolute lack of reason. For she was not dying from fear or loneliness or love, she thought ; she was just dying so that she would not be pestered any more by life, would not have to think any more, or face the future.

She had come now from Cambridge Circus through a maze of narrow, ill-smelling streets, down to Upper St. Martin's Lane. She was getting tired again. She must do it soon.

Do it ? There was the act. She had not thought of that. She had to find a way. And quickly. How did people do it ? By poison, by a shot, by the river. She shuddered a little. This was terrifying. She had got to face something violent and horrible before she could find her peace. Her mind began to surge again, all the placidity gone. She stood still on the pavement trying to picture it. She could not shoot herself, or obtain poison. The river—that must be it. The usual way, after all. Lots of people did it. When she had learnt to roller-skate ages ago, someone had said, "Never mind if you fall over. You must remember all these people have had to learn. They've all fallen over once or twice." So it was all right. Other people had thrown themselves in the river. So she could.

She could get down to it this way. There it would

lie, swollen and peaceful this rainy night. And she would pull her fur coat round her to keep warm, and fall straight in. Would the cold water get through her coat to her skin before she was dead? Probably not. If she kept it round herself and shut her eyes and just lay still, she would soon find her peace.

Then, as she pictured it, she suddenly thought that it was funny. To jump off a bridge? It was ridiculous. There you stood on the parapet—then a jump and a big splash. It was laughable—like a film. She could not do that. She was a wealthy middle-aged woman taking a stroll in London. Whatever had she meant by thinking of the river?

She laughed. She laughed out loud, standing on the pavement. She could not help laughing, it was so funny. Whatever had given her such an idea? Abruptly she was aware of two girls looking at her. She realized that she was alone, and laughing out loud—making a scene. "Drunk!" said one disgustedly. Mary hurried on.

This was the way—this would lead her to the Embankment. If others could do it, she could. She would not struggle, nor try to swim, nor catch hold of anything—she would just close her eyes, and sink quietly to rest. Nothing would disturb her then. They would pull out her body, but she would sleep on.

"Drunk!" that girl had said. She was not! How cruel and bitter to say that! She had had nothing to drink all day—or to eat, either. How *wicked* that girl had been to call her drunk! Perhaps she ought to have a drink. Perhaps she ought to have a drink, though. It would make it easier. She wondered whether she could go into a public-house and ask for a drink. She had never done so in her life. But, after all, after two years in Smetham—"lady to take charge of small private bar"—she ought to be able to ask for a drink.

She was in one of the streets which lead from Covent Garden to the Strand. She found a public-house on her right, and entered the saloon bar. She was conscious of being watched. There were only two people sitting there,

both women, but they paused in their talk to look at her incongruous figure. She asked for a double whisky and soda, and drinking it, she observed the two. She was one of them now. She was here in a "pub" with them, drinking, and one with them. It was a strange sensation.

Almost at once the spirit went to her head. She had eaten nothing all day. It made the two women become in her eyes tremendously important. The whole world faded out of recollection and left her here alone drinking with these two women. She watched them devoutly. The one nearer to her was tall, sallow, town-bred, with a rather whining voice ; the other was plumper, and from the country. It was the thin woman who spoke most. "And you'd be surprised," she was saying, "how quickly things like that do happen to girls in London. I knew she was on the streets, as you might say, the moment I saw her."

"You did ?" said the other one, obviously enjoying it.

"Well, it did not take much to see it. The way she was painted up and that. And not six months ago she'd been helping her mother with the children same as you and I might have done. Well, here's luck !"

"Good health," said the other.

But the thin woman whined on. "What you see on the pictures isn't all lies," she said. "The things I've seen in this town would surprise you. Why, only the other night they heard a to-do in a house not two streets from us, and they went in and found a girl with her froat cut. Well, I wasn't there, but the lady next door happened to be passing at the time, and she said the place was covered in blood."

"There !" said the stouter woman appreciatively.

"Oh yes. You never really know what may happen next, as you might say, nor who won't do anything." She was evidently enjoying the impression she was making on her less experienced friend. "Things happen before you know where you are," she added impressively.

Mary could not resist that. She leaned across and

said, her voice quavering: "Perhaps you'd be surprised to hear that I'm going to commit suicide this evening?"

Both women started, but the thin one quickly mastered herself. "Don't you be so wicked!" she said. "Whatever for?"

Mary felt she could not go into more explanations. She gave a little shrug and leant back in her corner again, closing her eyes and resting from the effort of speaking to them.

For a moment there was silence between the women, then the elder whispered, "Soused!" with a very emphatic nod to the other.

"Do you think she meant it?" said the stouter woman in an awed voice.

"You can't tell, that you can't. I've heard of stranger things. You read cases in the paper where they was cheerful as could be one minute, and their heads in the gas-oven the next, as you might say."

"Do you think we ought to do anything about her?"

"Gracious, no! You don't want to lose work careering about police-courts, do you? She's probably had too much to drink and saying the first thing that comes into her head."

All this, word after word, Mary listened to from her corner, but could retain none of it, could not even understand it. But she knew they were talking about her. "I *am* going to," she said tearfully, "so it's no good your saying I'm not."

"Who's saying you're not?" said the older woman rather indignantly. "I only hope you do, that's all. Good riddance, I should say!" And she nodded to her companion as much as to imply "That settled her!"

Presently Mary got up and went out, then down the hill, across the Strand, towards the Embankment. She felt a new elation. The almost raw spirit had stimulated her determination. It would not be hard now. She reached the stonework and leaned over. She looked down at the water and shuddered slightly, so opaque and cold did it seem. But it would not be hard. She would

keep her coat about her and rest. She went back to a seat across the promenade.

Two men sat down beside her presently, their only distinction in this light and to her—their hats. One wore a felt hat and the other a peculiarly shaped bowler. "Stopped raining for a bit," said the felt-hatted one.

"So it has," said the bowler, and for a long time there was silence. Then the last speaker went on. "I knew this morning it was going to rain. I always know," he added, with sad satisfaction. "Yes, I always know. Down where I live they call me the weather prophet. I always know when it's going to rain, you see."

They smoked without speaking for a while. Then the felt-hatted one proposed moving on. They drifted away. . . . Mere voices. Mary sat still. A barge came up the river. Sullenly she watched it go by.

The river ; she had heard all about it, had read stories about the folk who had sought it at last, for whom the world had been too strong, or too passionate, or perhaps just too dull ; folk without homes, or who did not want homes—broken, fallen, or hungry. But tonight in this warm, misty rain it seemed peaceable. She could sit still and contemplate it. Now and again a figure dragged by, and once a policeman strode along. But the wide walk between street and parapet was nearly empty.

An oldish woman shuffled up and took the place beside her. She could see her dimly in this light—small, rheumy eyes with pulpy, creased flesh about them ; a battered hat which had once been mauve felt ; and shapeless, fluttering garments. She sat still, her hands hidden somewhere among her clothes, her chin down. For some time Mary said nothing, then she asked, "If you were going to finish yourself, where would you do it from ?"

She was horrified to find that the woman evinced no surprise at her question and answered it conversationally, almost as a matter of course. "I've often wondered that," she said, and her voice was not quite without the croak of an old refinement. "Probably from Westminster Bridge," she added.

"I'm going to do it tonight," confided Mary.

"Lots of people say that," said the woman, with a peculiar stretch of her lips into a smile. "Lots say that almost every day. But you won't do it when it comes to the point. Not when it comes to it, you won't."

"Why—is it so hard ?" Mary quivered a little.

"Well, I don't know what it is," said the woman slowly. "It is not that you want to go on, and it's not exactly that you're afraid. But somehow in the end you don't do it. I often used to think about it."

"Did you ?"

"Gawd, yes ! It seemed such an easy way to wind things up. But you never do it, you know. I knew a chap once—clever chap he was, died of consumption afterwards—and I remember talking about the very same thing. I asked him why it was. 'Sense of humour,' he said. He meant that you can't make such a bloody fool of yourself ! Well, after all, it is a bit soft—going splashing about in the water with clothes on. I always say you have only once to live and you may as well die a natural death. And it don't generally take much longer when you've once got it into your head, though, as I often think . . ."

She went on, but Mary had forgotten her. "I'm going to do it," she said, getting up.

"Wish you luck. It will be pretty ruddy cold tonight," said the woman.

Mary remembered the money in her bag. She took out the remains of her notes. There were two five-pound ones, and a single pound. She had a fortifying sense of making an inevitable decision when she gave these to the woman. "You may as well have them," she said. "No more use to me."

A dirty and claw-like hand shot out from among the woman's clothes and seized them. She examined them close to her face. "Gawd !" she said. "You ain't down, then ? 'Tisn't that ?"

It was the first time that either of their personalities had obtruded itself. "No," said Mary, "it's not that."

"Well, look here, you hang on to this one. You'll need it." She handed her back the pound. "Better keep on—go on! You won't do it when it comes to the point. You'll need this. . . ."

"No," said Mary vacantly, "I shan't need it." And she left the woman aghast.

Slowly and with soft persistence it began to rain again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BRUCE

On the day when he might have received an answer to the letter he had sent his mother, Bruce went out to the telephone. He had waited for the post and it had brought him nothing. He could bear the anxiety no longer and 'phoned Silliwake. Emilio answered him and told him that both his mother and Tito were away. That relieved him a little. His letter would have been forwarded, and he could not expect an answer till the following morning.

He had felt, since he had returned to Smetham, that the life of the place was enveloping him again. It was disquieting to find its old pungent atmosphere so strong about him that he continually thought of himself once more as a member of the Burnley Road household. Aunt Eileen assisted this. Talking of rooms, for instance, she had suggested that he might like to move back into his former "den", as she called it ; and when he mentioned to her as tactfully as he could that since he had money she might allow him to be a "sort of paying guest for a few days", she had said that when he had got a job they could think about that. So this morning, his 'phone-call done, he looked round uneasily at the buildings about him as though they had really clutched him back to them.

The town was wintry now, its buildings rain-soaked and colourless under a grey sky. This was how he remembered it first when—nearly three years ago—he had spent his first dismal afternoon here. And he felt as though he had got no farther since then, as though he were back here with nothing before him again but the prospect of a life walled in by these overshadowing houses.

He recognized that not only for his mother's sake but for his own his return to Smetham had been a rash and useless gesture. He should have gone up to Oxford, as she suggested. Left Silliwake that night, stayed at an hotel somewhere, and gone to Oxford next day—to come home two months later and find Lindita departed.

And yet . . . and yet . . . he still remembered the *fear* of that evening. It had been sheer, unmitigated funk that had driven him to Smetham. He had found himself in a situation for which his inadequate code made no allowance, faced with a problem for which he could find no expedient save flight. Against nature. That was the core of it. He had gone against nature, and, discovering it, had lost his head. Well, he must face the consequences.

And still something told him that in sacrificing all he had gained, all that Tito was doing for him, he had been blindly following an obscure sense of right. It had not been easy to chuck it all away. Oh, damnation, how could he be expected to know what he should have done? The Mouse had condemned him as a prig to feel as he had about his mother. Then he was a prig, because he *had* felt it. No use denying that—his mother would never be the same to him again.

He decided to go for a walk. He took a bus to the top of Spleen Hill and started out across the fields. All the morning he walked on, for he had told Aunt Eileen he might not be back to lunch. All the cold morning he tramped heedlessly through Pickham Woods, out on to another road, beyond Pickham itself, not wanting to pause or return. He would tire himself out, he thought, so that tonight he could sleep and would wake tomorrow morning to find his mother's reply, bringing about his return . . . relieving him of Smetham.

But as he walked on he could not forget what was driving him across country, the nagging recollection of what he had done that night and its consequences. So much had been snatched away. He had lost three people, or three conceptions of people, which was for him much the same thing. His father, his mother, his love.

They had all been taken irrevocably away by a few words from his mother, and for that he felt that he had a right to pity himself. But he had found something in their place. He was afraid to admit it to himself . . . but there was a compensation in Paula.

He supposed in a way the Mouse was right about him —using people. Unconsciously he used people to satisfy what the Mouse called his instinct for self-content. His heart must be like a vessel—incapable of vacuum. As soon as the ideal of Lindita had gone out the thought of Paula took its place. That's all he was, then. Ready to hold any dream, but necessitous always of one.

He must be a rotter—no escaping that—to be able to think of Paula so soon as he had lost Lindita. Something inhuman about that. Yet now Paula seemed very important to him. She loved him. He needed to be loved just now. The friendship of the Mouse was not enough. The Mouse blamed him. Paula would never do that. She would believe in him, follow him, trust him. Even when he picked up the old life again he would keep Paula.

It was uncertainty that was making him so wretched. Already Uncle Robert had said something at "the meal" last night about a job. Naturally he and Aunt Eileen did not want him living there idle for ever. Why had not his mother left word where she would be? He could have 'phoned her then, and known what to do. It was nerve-racking not to know in the least what course to follow.

Perhaps when she had got his letter this morning, forwarded from Silliwake, his mother would have wired. The thought made him turn back at once. It cheered him too. Of course, that was what she would have done—wired him her address! The telegram would be waiting in Burnley Road now.

Returning thus to practicalities he remembered that he was ravenously hungry. He had had no lunch and it was half past three. He found a cottage near Pickham where "Teas" were advertised, and went in, ordering

a pot of tea and two poached eggs. He ate them quickly, lit a cigarette, paid, and went on feeling much better. Silly to bother about Smetham when there would be a telegram waiting for him—or at worst a letter in the morning—which would show his way out of it, his return to a more pleasant world. Silly to bother. He would walk quickly home, and tomorrow . . .

It was dark before he came out of Pickham Woods, which ended high on a hillside above the three towns. But when he was nearly to their edge he gave a little cry and stopped. It seemed that by magic the last thin trees of the wood had been hung with thousands of tiny lights—like Christmas trees. He realized that these were the lights of the towns three miles away down in the valley beyond the river. And when he had emerged they shone through the silky dusk like a heap of sparkling jewels dropped carelessly there from a great height, scattered, clustered thickly in some places, sparse and yellow in others. "If they were only like that when you approached," he thought, setting out across the field for Spleen.

He came at last to the house in Burnley Road, but it was in darkness. He went out to the kitchen and asked Agnes where they all were.

"Gone out, Mr. Bruce," she said shortly. "London."

"Gone to London ?"

"Yes. Mr. and Mrs. and Miss Paula. Mr. Tom, you know's, away."

"To London ?" repeated Bruce incredulously.

"Yes. Telegram came."

"A telegram ? What about ?"

"Oh, don't take anyone up so, Mr. Bruce. I'm sure I don't know."

Bruce went through into the drawing-room, but did not turn on the light or pull the curtains. He sat there in the musty atmosphere of closed windows and overcrowded furniture, puzzling over what Agnes had said. A telegram ? Had his mother, then, wired him her address and they had gone to her without waiting for

him? That would be cruel. If they had done that he would . . . Or had she wired for them to see them and make some arrangements for him? Could his mother actually not want to see him? Or was she ill? If that was so, why had not they left an address so that he could follow?

He sat perplexed for a long time, then, tired by his walk and the stuffy warmth of the room, he slowly dozed off into a troubled sleep.

He was awakened by the squeak of the iron gate, and in a moment Paula was in the room with him. He sat up, dazed and sick with the liverish dizziness of one who had slept in a chair with a collar on. He looked at Paula with bleared, startled eyes.

"What is it?" he said.

She threw off her hat and coat, closed the door, and crossed to him. She had not turned on the light.

"Bruce . . ." she faltered.

"Where's Aunt Eileen?" Bruce demanded.

"They . . . won't be back tonight. They're staying in London. . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Bruce . . . darling—your mother!"

"Well?"

She had sunk to the floor beside him. She knelt close to him, grasping his hands, her face turned up to him white and tearful. "Bruce . . . she's dead."

For a very long time neither of them spoke. Paula covered his hands with helpless, unheeded kisses, and Bruce looked stubbornly towards the window. There was nothing for either to say. Paula cried very softly, as though afraid to intensify his grief by her tears. At last Bruce said, "How?"

"She . . . took her own life, Bruce." And then, as though to distract him, she talked quickly on. "They were called up to identify her. We got the wire after lunch. I said I'd come back and break it to you. . . ."

Suddenly Bruce stood up. "It's my fault," he said at last.

"You're not to say that, Bruce," cried Paula, seeming to have been prepared for those very words. "You're not to say that! It wasn't your fault. Her doctor told Mother that she had been suffering for months from neurasthenia. You're not to blame yourself. . . ."

But Bruce did not answer. He sank again into the chair and remained chill and motionless while Paula tried to comfort him.

He had never thought of that—please God that thought had never entered his head. But he saw it now. He had left his mother and it had been to her death. Presently he asked Paula more, and glad to talk—glad that he should listen even to such details because it meant that his mind was going on—she told him all she knew. But still his eyes would not come back to her, still he was rigid and lost in despair.

When she had told him everything there was silence again. Not for many minutes did Bruce break down and cover his face with his hands, dropped low on his knees. Then his sobs were dry and hysterical—with no relief in them.

The actual picture horrified him most. His little delicate mother being drowned. . . . Hitherto suicide had seemed something as remote as murder and the other unthinkable happenings recorded in newspapers. That his own mother, charming and restful in her home, should have taken her frail body to that death. . . . And it was his fault. Why had he left her? Oh, God—why had he left her for a moment alone? Why hadn't he seen? And she had not had his letter—even his message. She had died without knowing that he wanted to return to her. No—actually because she thought he did not. His fault. All his fault.

What was the use now of thinking of her lonely at the last—going tired and lonely to the Thames? He could never be happy again. Never again be unashamed. If the Mouse had said what he did the other night without knowing this, what would he think of him now? What

would everyone think of him? A matricide, that's what he was. He'd killed his mother. . . .

"You'll go on," the Mouse had said, "whatever happens. You're practically invulnerable." Was he? The Mouse was a *cad* to talk like that. Invulnerable! He was broken now. He could never go on. His mother was dead and he wanted no more. He would hate himself so long as he lived. He would never even be *interested* in anything again. She had died because of him, and he wanted to die too! Shut up, maudlin fool, shut up! What's the use of whining? He had left his mother, and because of him she had thrown her beautiful little body in the river. They had found her dead. Pulled her out and discussed her—*his* mother.

And now there was nothing left for him. Smetham. Well, Smetham was good enough for a matricide. He would live here and work here, and suffer . . . and try to atone. He could never hope for anything more. . . .

They would all hate him. After what the Mouse said, they would all hate him, say it was his fault. . . .

"Bruce . . ." Paula was speaking to him.

Bruce looked down at her. She was kneeling close to him, her arms stretched up to him. "Bruce, you're not to blame yourself. I know it wasn't your fault. I know, Bruce. . . ."

Her large eyes pleaded with him. He became conscious of her proximity, and glad of it. His hand dropped to her shoulder. Scarcely knowing what he did he slipped his fingers under her dress so that the palm of his hand rested on the warm white ball of her shoulder. He looked into her tearful eyes. She loved him, anyway. Here at least was comfort. Feeling her pressed close to him, worshipping him unquestioningly, Bruce felt suddenly that he possessed two bodies controlled by his one mind.

THE END